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TATIANA: A RUSSIAN HEROINE

Pushkin was the first to render poetically Russian society in the 1820s, and in the characters of Onegin and Lenski he showed its principal, that is its masculine side. 1 This was a great achievement. But he was also the first to render poetically Russian woman in the person of Tatiana, and very likely this is an even greater achievement. Under all circumstances and in all strata of Russian society man plays the principal role. But we cannot say that woman plays a secondary and subservient role, because she plays no role at all. The only exception is in the upper stratum of society—at least to some extent. It is high time we admitted that despite our passion for imitating European ways, despite our balls, despite the despair of the Slavophiles, who are convinced that we have all completely degenerated into Germans, we still lack chivalry. The truth is that our concern for woman, our readiness to live and die for her, is somehow theatrical and smacks of affectation. It doesn’t come naturally but is simply put on for show. Why, for all I know, now even the esteemed merchant whose beard smells just a little of cabbage and onions takes his missus by the arm, when he walks down the street with her, instead of shoving her in the back with his knee all the while leading the way, forbidding her to stand gaping. But at home it is quite a different story.

But why talk about what goes on at home? Why wash dirty linen in public? Seizing upon ready-made foreign phrases, we cry in verse and in prose: ‘Woman is the queen of society, her charming presence graces society,’ and so forth. But just look at our society (with the exception of the upper stratum). Everywhere you go you find that men keep to themselves and women to themselves. Even the most dashing lady’s man seems to feel that whiling away the time in the company of women is a sacrifice. If he deigns

1. This article was originally published in Otechestvennye zapiski in 1845. It is the ninth article in Belinskii’s series of eleven articles on Pushkin. The title provided is my own. The text used is that found in the Academy Edition of Belinskii’s works: Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, 13 vols. (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1953-59), VII, 473-504. All verse translations are taken from Alexander Pushkin, Eugene Onegin, tr. Walter Arndt, 2d rev. ed. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981). The text of this article has been edited in two ways. Belinskii’s long critique of the position of women in Russia has been slightly abbreviated by eliminating paragraphs. Similarly, Belinskii’s quotations of long passages from Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin have been reduced.
—Tr.
to do so, he rises with a wearied look, as if he had performed an arduous
task, and goes off to join the men for a breath of fresh air. In Europe, woman
truly is the queen of society; happy and proud is the man she favors with her
attention. With us it is just the reverse; a woman is flattered if a man deigns
to talk to her. She is happy and proud if he favors her with attention. And
how can things be otherwise in a society where affectation takes the place of
good manners. Poetry in books is fine, but we fear it in life like the plague.

But how can you offer your arm to a girl, if she doesn’t dare take it
without first getting Mama’s permission? How can you resolve to have long
and frequent conversations with her, knowing as you do that this will make
people talk. That they will say you are in love with her or, worse, announce
that you are her fiance. Then you will have compromised her and gotten
yourself into trouble. And if people think you are in love with her, you
won’t escape the sly and witty insinuations, the gibes of friends, the naive
and quite sincere questions of utter strangers. But things will be even worse,
if people conclude that you want to marry her. If her parents don’t consider
you a good match for their daughter, they will show you the door and forbid
their daughter to talk to you in other people’s homes. On the other hand, if
they consider you a good match, it will be even worse.

They will put out traps to snare you, and very likely you will find your-
self married before you have even had a chance to come to and ask yourself
how and when this all happened. And if you are a man of character and do
not give in, then there will be a scene you will long remember. Why does
this all happen? Because in Russia men don’t understand and don’t want to
understand what a woman really is. They don’t feel any need for her, they
don’t seek her out, for the simple reason that in our society woman does not
exist. With us the “fair sex” is found only in novels, stories, dramas, and
elegies. In reality, however, there are four categories of women in our society:
little girls, prospective brides, married women, and finally old maids and old
women. Being children, the first category interests no one. The last category
is feared and hated by all (and often with good reason). Consequently, our
fair sex really consists of two groups: girls who must marry and women who
are already married.

A Russian girl is not a woman in the European sense of the word; she is
not an individual. She is nothing more than a prospective bride [nevesta].
While still a small child, she regards all the men around her as suitors and
often promises to marry her Papa or her brother. While yet in the cradle, her
mother and her father and her sisters and her brothers and her wet-nurses and
her nannies and all the folk who surround her tell her that she is an eligible
young lady and must have suitors. Hardly is she twelve years old, when her
mother, reproaching her for laziness, for lacking manners, and other such
faults, says to her: “Aren’t you ashamed, young lady; after all, you are