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WHAT IS PROSTITUTION GOOD FOR?
DOSTOEVSKY, CHERNYSHEVSKY,
TOLSTOY AND THE "WOMAN QUESTION"
IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

We know that the development of (female) prostitution in Europe is closely associated with the social and political rise of the middle class, a social class which differs above all in terms of morality from the rival social forces, from the aristocracy, the peasantry and the proletariat. We also know how effective the bourgeoisie has been when it comes to repression. Bourgeois morality is one of double standards, where husbands find an outlet for their supposedly sublimated sexuality in the brothels, while back at home their wives endure attacks of hysteria thanks to their unsatisfied desires. The brothel and the psychoanalyst’s couch provide the requisite corrective and hence the requisite trappings of bourgeois moralization and physical restraint. Two by-products of this self-restraint are an increasing gender gap and the dividing up of responsibilities according to gender. She exists only for him – consumed with love, waiting for him to honour her with his presence – while he devotes himself to the pursuit of his profession and at times, after work, of other pleasures, too. Literature dealing with prostitution is quite willing to endorse this mechanism of control, and is in fact itself a part of bourgeois control and the self-assertion of the third estate. This applies both to West European and Russian literature during the latter half of the nineteenth century. But there are some differences.

When prostitutes and concubines are celebrated and depicted as active heroines, as for instance in Balzac’s Splendeur et misères des courtisanes and especially in Zola’s Nana, this is in itself a reflection of the absolute self-assurance of a class that can afford to take a candid look at its seamier sides. The situation in Russian literature is somewhat different. Here, the cautious, moralising or even idealising approach to the subject of prostitution – which we find in Chernyshevsky as well as in Dostoevsky und Tolstoy – points instead to the sluggish establishment of middle-class society, to an arduous process that is still on-going at the turn of the century. The new gender roles – she: sensitive and
highly-strung, he: rational and practical by nature – are still being defined, and the moral code or rather the moral text is also designed to create distance between the upper and the lower social classes. This holds true even when it appears that the opposite is being said, in the case of Dostoevsky, for instance, who clearly holds the common people very dear to his heart. The fact is that all three authors avoid any realistic representation of real-life prostitutes and as such the depiction of women from the lower classes. However, as we know from the contemporary ethnographic studies of Olga Semenova¹ and Aleksandra Efimenko² and from recent discourse-analytical studies such as Laura Engelstein’s The Keys to Happiness,³ Russian women of lower birth – be it in the countryside or the cities and towns – are extremely sexually active. They are permissive, and they are also remarkably shrewd businesswomen. For an appropriate fee – besides money, apples or eggs are also an option⁴ – they agree to all sorts of adventures. In poetry and fiction, on the other hand, we encounter fundamentally good creatures driven astray by adversity and deserving of our pity. These relatively simple figures serve chiefly as a foil to the complex male characters, all of them intellectuals, who are then able to appear in a particularly favourable light. Russian realistic literature centres on the benefactors, the clients, and the seducers. In Chto delat’? (What is to be done?), in Zapiski iz podpol’ia (Notes from Underground), Prestuplenie i nakazanie (Crime and Punishment) and in Voskresenie (Resurrection) we observe the biographical progression, the psychological development and the moral purification of men. The prostitutes are at most catalysts of this process, they facilitate matters, but that is the extent of it. And so the ‘woman question’ unexpectedly shifts to the male preserve. But despite their evident common ground, due perhaps to the historical development of Russian society, we can also note points of contention between the individual writers. The subject of prostitution sparks off an intertextual dialogue addressing sexuality, morality, the common people, and belief. This dispute, its nuances, form the subject of the follow-

¹. O. Semyonova Tian-Shanskaia, Village Life in Late Tsarist Russia (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press 1993).
⁴. Semyonova, Village Life in Late Tsarist Russia, pp. 54-56.