Katie Bloomer

Dr. Kirk Boyle

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How to Survive as a Woman Writer:

Contextualizing “Conversation Between Me and the Women”

Across a wide range of cultures and for a sizeable portion of history, whenever a woman picks up her pen to write, there has persisted two questions: what should they write about, and how? If they write about traditionally feminine topics – such as love and social activities – their writing is seen as insignificant by the widely male audience. If they write about traditionally masculine topics – such as war and politics – they are seen as radical, rejecting their duties as a woman, and their work is often censored. It then becomes an issue for women to choose between the two incompatible roles: to be a woman or to be a writer. Anna Bunina’s poem, “A Conversation Between Me and the Women,” addresses this topic while simultaneously mocking the society who implements these standards, as well as those who follow such societal rules.

The late 18th – early 19th century saw a rise in women writers in Russia, and there are a few factors attributed to this development. The 1790s saw an increase in the number of women writers, “largely due to a rise in the number of translators” (Rosslyn 228-229). Women were more likely to translate foreign works than undertake creative writing, because many upper-class women of Russia were bilingual. This was due not only to superior private education of the upper-class, but also to the influence of Western Europe, especially France, on Russian culture. Russia was introduced to Western literature during the 17th century during a period of Westernization, and during the late 18th century, “there was a large and steady demand for translated literature from Western Europe, which was the source both of high culture and of entertaining reading” (Rosslyn 224). With public demand predominantly in favor of translated works, Bunina complained in a letter to her mentor that, “Russian literature does not attract the attention of Russians or of foreigners and our poor writers, good and bad, do not know for whom they are writing, because no one reads them or buys them” (Rosslyn 234). She considered the surrounding Western influence as well as her audience when writing. Instead of writing about women, “many of whom read Russian less well than French, and shared neither her culture nor her experience,” she focused on more popular topics, “taking advantage of small but specific markets” (Rosslyn 236, 233). This included, most notably, the growing patriotism of her time. In 1812, Napoleon led an unsuccessful campaign into Russia, dubbed the Patriotic War by Russians. This victory led to a subsequent desire for patriotic writing, and Bunina took advantage of the growing genre.

Simultaneously, there was a growing movement in Russia that advocated for the inclusion of women in literature: Sentimentalism. Built on the ideas and principles of Enlightenment philosophy, the movement aimed to “explore the relationship between the self, a political and social order, and nature,” in order to “prevail over collectively shared values” (Schönle 725). Sentimentalism was similar to the Romanticist movement in Western Europe in their shared belief in the worth of “spontaneous, unschooled writing – the kind of writing that emerges directly from the heart, without distillation through the mind” (Schönle 743).

Within the school of sentimentalism dwelled the *Karamzinists*, who followed the teachings of N.M. Karamzin, a prominent sentimentalist figure. Karamzin advocated for the inclusion of women in order to create a new age of literary language and literature. “Ladies’ taste was declared the supreme arbiter of literature,” and they were declared “the educator of future generations,” (Rosenholm 162). The realm in which they wrote was often referred to as the literary salon, which was “the more ‘natural’, real and symbolic place where the legitimization of woman as a creative being” could be possible (Rosenholm 165). This was reflective of the social salons traditionally hosted by women of the upper-class “where people of different allegiances, ideas and literary parties met” (Rosenholm 166). The salon was associated with women’s speech, and the narrative relied on the “participation in lively and entertaining social conversation, the organization and maintenance of which, was thought to be women’s business and skill” (Rosenholm 166). In this sense, while women were free to write, their subject matter was restrained, and only by accepting the rules and agreeing to the conventions of feminization could they gain the proud title of “salon or ballroom poetess” (Rosenholm 166). Thus, Karamzin’s attempts to feminize literature had two contradictory outcomes: on the one hand, “it legitimized femininity as publicly significant and creative,” on the other, “it laid down strict limits” for the representation of women (Rosenholm 163).

Alongside Karamzin there arose an opposing ideology: the *Shishkovites*, who looked to the teachings of Alexander Shishkov. Those under this banner “rejected the sensibility, sentimentality and the salon style which were associated with femininity” (Rosenholm 163). Shishkov was not only a prominent figure in the sentimentalist movement, but in Bunina’s life as well. She had a variety of patrons and mentors in her lifetime, mostly in the form of relatives with high connections: one was “a minor poet and adherent of Karamzin,” and the other was “tutor to two of the Grand Princes” (Rosslyn 231). But possibly her most beneficial mentor was Shishkov, who “provided patronage in the form of comments on Bunina's poems… and in the form of help with publishing her writing” (Rosslyn 231). He was an admiral (and later President) of the Russian Academy and was able to use his status and connections on her behalf. The two were close, they corresponded regularly, and she placed her confidence in him. One such letter reveals Bunina’s misgivings about writing under the patronage system: “My happiness would be uncloudable if I could write only for my own satisfaction and that of others and if my acquaintance with the Muses were pure and not connected with gain” (Rosslyn 230).

During this time, Russian literature was transitioning from a system of patronage to dilettantism. Patronage was the act of nobility, or those with an extravagant amount of expendable income, paying for specialized works from writers, mostly poets. “These poems frequently elevated the imperial family to the status of idealized demi-gods,” (Rosslyn 240). For anyone who wanted to make a living on their writing, finding a patron was essential. However, the turn of the century saw a shift away from this system and towards one that saw creative writing as a social accomplishment and an activity of leisure rather than livelihood. This led to the rise of dilettantism which, simply put, was writing for the sake of writing. This allowed writers to branch out and explore ideas that the nobility might not have found tasteful or flattering to themselves. Writers, especially men, “often presented themselves as dilettantes in order to avoid the stigma of writing for gain from a patron, and so jeopardizing their moral integrity” (Rosslyn 224). For many, this shift away from writing for economic gain was not significant; most writers of the time were from the upper-class, and so they “neither expected to live on income from their literary activity nor needed to do so” (Rosslyn 224). However, that was not the case for the rising class of women writers. “Patronage of women was felt to be the natural order of things,” and those women who chose to publish “without resorting to patronage, were censured for not having sought out connections at 'the court of literature' and asked advice” (Rosslyn 227). If a woman wanted to make money as a writer, she would either find work translating or writing odes for various patrons, especially those in the imperial court, and they were “rewarded with gifts such as jewellery or pensions” (Rosslyn 227). Alexander I and his family were especially well-known as “enthusiastic patrons of literature,” and Bunina received pensions from them on occasion, which, “combined with income from other sources,” allowed her to live independently as a writer (Rosslyn 228-231).

Bunina was the first Russian women to earn a living as a writer, but, while this was a great accomplishment for the time, it was not without its hardships. Bunina may have been from a wealthy family, but her inheritance was so small that she quickly spent in it on furthering her education. While she maintained good relations with her remaining family, she decided to live independently and find her own means of income. She never married or had children and was thus able to “make writing the central activity of her life” (Rosslyn 230). However, she continued to face financial hardships. She fell victim to breast cancer, which eventually killed her, and the large medical expenses of her treatments were added on top of the debt she had accumulated as a writer.

During this time, “it was customary for writers to meet the costs of printing,” and, as an impoverished woman, Bunina did not have the means to do so. Her first book, *Pravila poezii* (*The Rules of Poetry*, 1808), was actually a translation of a French philosopher’s manual on poetry, and was deemed a practical text (a textbook). She was only able to publish it through the help of the Empress consort of Russia, Maria Feodorovna (also known as Sophie Dorothea of Wurttemberg), the second wife of Paul I. An old patron and mentor of Bunina’s was able to pass the translation on to the Empress and she, having “an active interest in the educational institutions under her patronage,” was able to finance the book’s publication (Rosslyn 232). The sales from her first book were “so satisfactory that Bunina was awarded a gold medal,” and hundreds of copies were sold (Rosslyn 232). However, she did not have as much luck with her second book, *Neopytnaia muza* (*The Inexperienced Muse*, 1809), which was a collection of poetry. She had to pay “for all or part of the publication costs,” and subsequently went into debt (Rosslyn 232). She was only able to make a living through “a combination of patronage, subscription and writing for small segments of the market” (Rosslyn 231).

There were very few options for a woman who wanted to live independently; the only way to live without the support of a husband or father, or the safeguard of a wealthy inheritance, was to write. However, when a woman chose to write for a living, there were a significant number of restraints on her. While this time saw an increase in women writers, women often still had to rely on various patrons, unlike their male counterparts. However, these rewards and pensions would not likely sustain them, and they had to find other means of income. Bunina chose to live her life as a writer and made creatively degrading decisions in order to make ends meet. While some may judge her tone in “Conversation Between Me and the Women” as being unkind and diminutive to her sex, understanding the historical context sheds light on her true purpose in writing the satirical poem. She is working within a patriarchal system that oppresses her voice, yet she manipulates it to her advantage. And she does this all while mocking those who believe they own her voice – men and women alike.

Works Cited

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