

## Chapter Five

# Criticism of Sentimentalist Conventions: Mariia Bolotnikova

This chapter examines the strategies adopted by a provincial Sentimentalist woman author to justify her writerly activity, with a particular focus on Mariia Bolotnikova (dates of birth and death unknown), whose collection was first published in 1817 and has never been republished. In creating her self-image as a woman poet, she made use of Sentimentalism's elevated appreciation of nature. Also, conforming to the display of modesty expected of a woman writer, she did refer to a male mentor. Bolotnikova's work nevertheless challenges the notion of woman as a superior yet naive being who is incapable of learning her lessons. Her writings not only criticise certain aspects of Sentimentalist 'feminisation' of culture, they also challenge the Sentimentalist association of subordination with woman and nature, and provide evidence of a cultural discourse which included debates about the human rights of both serfs and, crucially, women as well.

### Bolotnikova's life, work, and publication strategies

Very little biographical information is available on this author.<sup>1</sup> One source is Ivan Dolgorukii (1764–1832), provincial governor and himself author of some poems and comedies, who kept a social diary naming people who mattered to him. According to his diary, Bolotnikova was a married gentlewoman resident in the Orel region, some one hundred kilometres south of Moscow.<sup>2</sup> In 1817 she published a collection of poems, *Derevenskaia lira, ili chasy uedineniia* (The Country

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1 Some topics in this chapter have been discussed in Ursula Stohler: 'Released from Her Fetters? Natural Equality in the Work of the Russian Sentimentalist Woman Writer Mariia Bolotnikova.' *Aspasia. International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and South-eastern European Women's and Gender History* 2, 2008, pp. 1–27.

2 Ivan Dolgorukii: 'Bolotnikova.' In: *Kapishche moego serdtsa ili slovar' vsekh tekh lits, s koimi ia byl v raznykh otnosheniakh v techenii moei zhizni*. Imperatorskoe obshchestvo istorii i drevnostei rossiiskikh pri Moskovskom universitete: Moscow 1874, pp. 303–304 (p. 303).

Amanda Ewington mentions that Dolgorukii was the brother of the poet Princess Elizaveta Mikhailovna Dolgorukova and that he was sometimes referred to as Dolgorukov also, see

Lyre, or Hours of Solitude).<sup>3</sup> While we do not know to what extent she was aware of the political climate of her day, her work does display some familiarity with terms commonly used in Decembrist poetry to allude to the new, hotly debated republican ideas. We may therefore assume that she was interested in such literature.

Why did Bolotnikova have her work published in Moscow? Although, in the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, provincial cultural and intellectual life had been improving, Bolotnikova and other provincial women may still have found it difficult to publish their works locally. She may also have hoped for a more favourable reception of a collection published in Moscow.

Notwithstanding a discourse which associates provincial life with cultural backwardness, when creating her self-image as a woman poet, Bolotnikova employs the Sentimentalist equation of woman and nature. Playing on Sentimentalist associations of women with nature, her collection highlights the potential afforded by Sentimentalist aesthetics to prospective women authors living in more rural areas by immediately drawing the disarming picture of an innocent country maiden who lives far from civilisation's corrupting influence. In particular, Bolotnikova's epigraph to *The Country Lyre*<sup>4</sup> suggests that, like her peers, she conformed to aesthetic norms of cultural discourse in order to subvert them, using the association of woman with nature to declare herself a female poet. Here she claims that only those in direct contact with it can genuinely appreciate nature:

La nature ne se découvre  
Que dans les champs et les hameaux.  
C'est-là qu'à nos yeux elle s'ouvre  
Tandis que l'habitant du Louvre  
La voit à travers des rideaux.

L. F.

*Nature unveils herself  
Only in fields and hamlets.  
It is here that she opens herself to our eyes,  
Whereas the inhabitant of the Louvre*

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Ewington, Amanda (ed. and transl.): *Russian Women Poets of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*. Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies at the University of Toronto: Toronto 2014, p. 441.

3 Mariia Bolotnikova: *Derevenskaia lira, ili chasy uedineniia*. Tipografiia Reshetnikova: Moscow 1817.

4 The epigraph is in French and by an author whose initials only are given.

*Sees her through curtains.*

L. F.<sup>5</sup>

Making a virtue out of necessity in employing the Sentimentalist idealisation of the countryside, Bolotnikova explains why a woman living far from the hubs of intellectual life considers becoming a writer. Her epigraph suggests that, in contrast to city dwellers, who can only observe nature indirectly, a woman living in the countryside has the unique capacity of being nature's immediate interpreter.

Even though the education of provincial noblewomen began to be taken more seriously in the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a large number of them still only enjoyed a very basic education if any, and we know nothing about Bolotnikova's literary apprenticeship.

Replete with professions of modesty and humility which say less about her education than about her desire to conform to Sentimentalist expectations of modesty in writers, the Preface to her collection opens as follows:

Решившись напечатать слабые мои творения я не имела в виду угодить ни свету, где много находится Гениев во всяком роде, ни публике отечественной, где одним великим просвещенным умам предоставлено пожинать лавры, но небольшому обществу друзей...<sup>6</sup>

*Having decided to publish my feeble works, I did not intend to please either society, where there are many geniuses of every kind, nor the domestic public, where only great and enlightened minds are fit to earn laurels; but rather only the small society of my friends ...<sup>7</sup>*

Bolotnikova's opening conforms with the explanation expected from a woman who has decided to not just write, but to actually publish her work. In it, she reassures her readers that she has no intention of competing with established writers, but writes for like-minded friends only, who read her poems in the literary circles she has been hosting at her home. She also states that she is hoping only for her friends' approval and does not seek public recognition.

The introduction refers to the fairly informal way in which Sentimentalist literature was circulated, chiefly in domestic circles which provided women writers with an audience and feedback, also reinforcing the association, however, of female authors with dilettantism. Bolotnikova's friends could read her manuscripts at leisure. If it had indeed been her intention to offer her writings to them only, she would have had no need for publication. The result of publication was a broader readership—and a conflict with the display of modesty expected of Sentimentalist

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5 My translation.

6 Bolotnikova, 'Predislovie', pp. i–iv.

7 For a full English translation of the preface, see Ewington p. 445.

women writers. This explains why she claimed her decision to publish was due to her friends' 'forcing' (zastavliaiut) her to do so.

Bolotnikova's preface contains an explicit apology for her deficient writing style, claiming that the only instruction she had received since childhood were Dolgorukii's writings, and asking for clemency from better educated critics as they judge her poems. Her strategy somewhat resembles that of Anna Bunina, who—in advance apology for any shortcomings in her poems, and despite considerable support from a circle of respected men of letters—called one of her works *The Inexperienced Muse*.

Bolotnikova also observes Sentimentalist conventions of authorship by placing a religious poem at the beginning of her collection. 'A Prayer' (Molitva) portrays the narrator as a devout and humble woman. The fact that this is the only religious poem in the collection supports the assumption that its purpose is to signal Bolotnikova's conformity with Sentimentalist cultural norms, which conceptualised women as pious, not to say angelic, and to prevent people from associating her with self-importance, a trait considered unbecoming a woman.<sup>8</sup>

To see her work published, Bolotnikova also needed a male mentor's approval. Despite enhancements to provincial cultural life in the first two decades of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, such a man may still have been difficult to find. Bolotnikova therefore resorts to the strategy of using a symbolic mentor, dedicating her work to Dolgorukii. She names him in her second poem, the only one which features him. 'Dan' priznatel' nosti moego serdtsa kniaziiu I.M. Dolgorukovu' (A Debt of Gratitude from My Heart to Prince I.M. Dolgorukii) reiterates the importance of his works to the development of her writing skills:

Как я Глафиру прочитала  
Камин, Парфиона и авось:  
Тогда кое-что написала,  
Что только в мысли мне пришлось.

*I had been reading Glafira  
Kamin, and probably Parfion:  
And then I wrote a thing or two,  
Whatever came into my head.*

In the course of the poem, Bolotnikova intensifies her display of respect for Dolgorukii's work, asserting at one point that his writings alone have taught her to put her gifts to good use:

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8 Bolotnikova, 'Molitva', pp. 1–3.

Тебе обязана сим даром,  
Твой слог способность мне развил;  
Тебя благодарю я с жаром —  
Ты жизнь мне нову подарил.<sup>9</sup>

*I owe this gift I have to you,  
Your words developed my own skill;  
I thank you most sincerely, warmly—  
You gave the gift of a new life.<sup>10</sup>*

Although motivated by the respectable ambition to be a writer, these expressions of gratitude to Dolgorukii create an unusually intense feeling of intimacy which goes well beyond a disciple's obligations to their mentor.

More than his work, it is Dolgorukii himself who appears to have become a source of inspiration for Bolotnikova's writing. In the following stanzas she notes that he has appeared to her in her dreams during moonlit nights. Her unusually passionate words of reverence for her imaginary mentor identify him as a male muse.

Since the primary purpose of the poem was to express conformity with Sentimentalist conventions of female authorship to enable her to publish her works, it is unlikely that Bolotnikova consciously intended to reverse the traditional gender pattern of male poet and female source of inspiration. Doing so would have created a serious conflict with the Sentimentalist image of women as passive and virtuous beings. However, Bolotnikova's homage to a male authority lacks the subtlety one might have expected from a Sentimentalist woman poet.

By paying lip service, at the beginning of her work, to notions of female modesty and female respect for religion and the patriarchal social order, Bolotnikova adopts strategies similar to those employed by women writers before her. Anna Volkova, for example, opened her *Stikhotvoreniia* (Poems, 1807) with numerous odes to the royal family; almost a third of the poems in her collection are panegyric, intended to attract patronage. As we have seen, Mariia Pospelova also placed several odes to the royal family at the beginning of her first collection, *Luchshie chasy zhizni moei* (The Best Hours of My Life, 1798), followed by religious poems. Almost a third of Pospelova's work consists of poems which express respect for the existing order.<sup>11</sup>

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9 Bolotnikova, 'Dan ' priznatel 'nosti moego serdtsa kniazuiu I.M. Dolgorukovu', pp. 4–8 (p. 5).

10 Translation by Emily Lygo.

11 Anna Volkova: *Stikhotvoreniia*. Morskaia Tipografiia: St Petersburg 1807; Mariia Pospelova: *Luchshie chasy zhizni moei*. Tipografiia gubernskago pravleniia: Vladimir 1798.

While Bolotnikova attempts to conform to Sentimentalist conventions of female authorship by paying homage to a male author, her decision to choose a mentor without requesting his prior permission nevertheless undermines the Sentimentalist notion of female humility she has been trying to project. She further challenges the notion by sending Dolgorukii a copy of her work, which he had not seen before. Her gesture initiates a correspondence over a period during which the two never actually met in person. In his autobiography, *Kapishche moego serdtsa* (The Temple of My Heart), Dolgorukii reveals that he was irritated by Bolotnikova's approach, whose poems he considered to be mediocre at best, and claims to have replied to her letters only as a matter of courtesy. In his eyes, a woman addressing a man in as direct a manner as Bolotnikova was impertinent. But when he finally met her in person during one of her visits to Moscow, he was surprised to find someone quite different from the image her letters had conjured up in his mind:

... нашел даму скромную, тихую, застенчивую даже, и с трудом мог понять, каким образом, будучи благоразумна, она так свободно приняла на себя звание автора, с которым кажется вовсе не сладит.<sup>12</sup>

...I found a modest, quiet, even shy woman, and found it difficult to understand how, being a sensible woman, she could so freely take on the title of author, which seemed not at all to suit her.<sup>13</sup>

The passage reveals an evident clash between the Sentimentalist notion of female modesty and Bolotnikova's determination to become a writer.

A further difficulty encountered by provincial women aspiring to be writers were the great distances from any cultural institutions. As Irina Savkina argues, and as outlined in Chapter Two, not every provincial woman had access to the intellectual stimulus of cultural circles. Savkina calls such women *provintsialki*, highlighting their status as outsiders in a double sense. Bolotnikova would have belonged to this category. To some extent she did benefit from the importance Sentimentalism ascribed to reading and education, increasingly so for women. Bolotnikova seems to occasionally have visited Moscow, which may have allowed her to buy reading materials.

Since she sold her work by subscription, we may assume that she read journals and magazines, some of which, including *Damskii zhurnal* (The Ladies' Magazine, 1806–1816), *Aglaiia* (1808–1812), *Kabinet Aspazii* (Aspasia's Cabinet, 1815), *Modnyi vestnik* (The Fashion Messenger, 1816), and *Vseobshchii modnyi zhurnal*

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12 Dolgorukii, p. 304.

13 Translation by Emily Lygo.

(General Fashion Magazine, 1817), featured many contributions by women, as outlined in Chapter Two. Such magazines may have inspired Bolotnikova's own literary endeavours.

As becomes clear from an account of a literary evening at Dolgorukii's Moscow home to which Bolotnikova was invited, it seems to have been difficult for her, however, to participate in established literary institutions and to be in touch with other people interested in literature. According to this account, she was mocked by the president, who welcomed her as an honorary member, requesting her to join the other members at their table. The farce made fun of Bolotnikova for being an unknown woman poet—and a provincial one to boot.<sup>14</sup> As the example illustrates, men struggled to accommodate provincial women writers in the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The high esteem of woman and the countryside professed by male authors bore little resemblance to actual reality.

Apart from the poem dedicated to Dolgorukii and the prayer which open Bolotnikova's collection, her other poems either express regret about the insincerity of people and about the absence of friends, or deliberately attack certain Sentimentalist values. Among the poems in which the narrator laments the insincerity of people are 'Roza, Fialka i Amarant, ili nevinnost' uvlechennaia v seti' (Rose, Violet, and Amaranth, or Innocence Ensnared) and 'Nyneshnii svet' (Today's World). 'Rose, Violet, and Amaranth' addresses salon intrigues and will be discussed in greater detail below; in 'Today's World' the narrator deplores social hypocrisy.

The second group of poems consists of elegies in which the narrator laments the absence of a (true) friend. In 'Nachertanie gorestnykh myslei o razluge s Kneiu A. P. Z-noi' (An Outline of Sorrowful Thoughts on the Separation from Princess A. P. Z-naya), for instance, the narrator remembers the happy hours spent with her visitor, and expresses sadness about their separation. Adapting the Sentimentalist cult of friendship to the pastoral, in which a male shepherd expresses his grief about his beloved shepherdess' absence, Bolotnikova makes her narrator declare that she cannot find happiness while her friend continues to live in a distant country. Similarly, the narrator in 'Vospominanie' (Recollection) cannot appreciate the idyllic beauty of nature around her because it reminds her of moments spent in the company of her now distant friend. In the monologue, 'Poslanie k Anete' (Epistle to Aneta), the narrator imagines the idyllic country life she would lead if she could share it with a true friend, cultivating a flower

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14 N. Brodskii: *Literaturnye salony i kruzhki. Pervaiia polovina XIX veka*. Academia: Leningrad 1930; repr. Olms: Zürich 1984, pp. 116–118.

garden and being as faithful as a pair of doves to one another—an image which was probably inspired by one of Salomon Gessner's works.

The third category of poems in Bolotnikova's work questions or addresses specific elements of Sentimentalist discourse, including the cult of feminisation, the equality of the sexes, and the situation of the serfs. The main focus of my study is on this category, which includes 'Razsuzhdenie moego Dvoret'skago' (My Butler's Thoughts), 'Uprek mushchinam' (A Reproach to Men), and 'Otvét na poslanie k zhenshchinam' (A Response to an Epistle to Women). The order of the poems in the collection is interesting. In what may be an attempt to soften the general impact of the collection, the more radical poems are interspersed with elegiac poems; the two poems which criticise the hypocrisy of salon life are also placed far from each other. The result is a balance between poems more in tune, and others more at odds with Sentimentalist fashion.<sup>15</sup>

Before embarking on an analysis of Bolotnikova's socio-political poems, I briefly wish to discuss the topics of nature, culture and gender in her poem 'Rose, Violet and Amaranth', which combines Sentimentalism's equation of woman with nature and innate goodness with the love intrigues of salon life, testifying to the growing importance of provincial salons. Violet, an innocent country flower, has been moved to the unknown and artificial world of a flower-bed, where the beautiful and confident Rose falsely promises her friendship, encouraging Violet to confess her feelings to handsome Amaranth. For a while the union looks promising, but Rose eventually draws Amaranth's attention to another flower, the yellow Lily. A newcomer to the intrigues of courtship and salon life, Violet is inconsolable. In this allegory, woman does not embody everlasting friendship and happiness, as she does in Pospelova's work. Rose is corrupt; Violet's innate goodness brings her sorrow rather than happiness. The poem's portrayal of the clash between the ideal and real worlds challenges the notion that people raised far from civilisation might become happier than sophisticates who can see through dishonest intentions.<sup>16</sup>

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- 15 Bolotnikova, 'Roza, Fialka i Amaranth, ili nevinnost' uvlechennaia v seti', pp. 8–17; 'Nyneshnii svet', pp. 44–46; 'Nachertanie gostnykh myslei o razluge s K-neiu A.P. Z-noi', pp. 23–26; 'Vospominanie', pp. 31–33; 'Poslanie k Anete', 37–41; 'Razsuzhdenie moego Dvoret'skago', pp. 18–22; 'Uprek mushchinam', pp. 29–30; 'Otvét na poslanie k zhenshchinam', pp. 52–55.
- 16 Bolotnikova, 'Roza, Fialka i Amaranth, ili nevinnost' , uvlechennaia v seti', pp. 8–17.



## 'A Reproach to Men'

As has been mentioned, many of Bolotnikova's poems are sentimental elegies, descriptions of the countryside and wistful memories of moments spent there with friends. In other poems, however, Bolotnikova expresses criticism of the prevailing social situation. 'A Reproach to Men' fiercely attacks the existing patriarchal order.<sup>17</sup> Prevented from expressing overt criticism in a political pamphlet, for example, by the Sentimentalist view of women as sources of beauty and virtue, Bolotnikova couches her message in poetic form: in terms borrowed from the domain of civil rights, 'A Reproach to Men' reproduces aspects of the cultural climate which has encouraged the spread of the idea of unconditional, equal human rights. The poem opens with a straightforward question as the narrator demands evidence for any kind of offence women may have committed:

Какое преступленье  
Соделал женский пол,  
Что вечно в заключеньи  
Он страждет от оков? —<sup>18</sup>

*What misdemeanour can it be  
The female sex committed,  
That means for all eternity  
We're shackled and imprisoned?*<sup>19</sup>

In Bolotnikova's view, political discrimination against women lacks any foundation whatsoever. Her initial question implies that she will refuse any arguments which attempt to justify women's social inequality by their role in Christian mythology: Original sin, and the concept of women as the principal guilty party, are foreign to her argument. Both 'prestuplen'e' (crime; rendered as 'misdemeanour' in the English translation of the poem) and 'zakon' (law), a term which occurs later, are legal terms. These references to jurisprudence, one of the administrative tools of a civil state, underline Sentimentalism's democratic potential, which Bolotnikova adapts to the situation of women.

In 'A Reproach to Men' Bolotnikova does not deny that sexual difference may determine gender roles, accepting that it is natural for each sex to play its own part in social relations. She hints at this when declaring that men, deemed physically stronger than women, should protect and cherish women. Here, Bolotnikova

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17 The entire poem in Russian and its English translation can be found in the Appendix. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Alexandra Murzina also addresses this topic.

18 Bolotnikova, 'Uprek mushchinam', pp. 29–30 (p. 29).

19 Translation by Emily Lygo.

reproduces the contemporary image of women as fragile beings in need of male protection common in Russia (as well as Europe):

Природа сотворила  
Защитниками вас,  
И вам определила,  
Покоить только нас.

*What nature had in mind was that  
You'd turn into defenders,  
In her design she meant for you  
To care for us alone.*

However, she also deplors the oppression of women resulting from this physical inequality. Just like other thinkers of her time, she locates the reason for the oppression of women in man's 'natural' physical superiority. Her poem denounces the unnatural subordination of women, which contradicts the basic laws of nature which govern relationships between men and women:

Пристрастно же толкуя  
Ея святой закон,  
Над нами торжествуя  
Вы заглушаете нам стон.

*You twist the meaning that you find  
Writ in her sacred law;  
You sense your triumph over us  
And stifle all our cries.*

The lyrical persona criticises the fact that sexual difference has become a reason for social discrimination. Bolotnikova highlights the gravity of the offence by adding the epithet 'sacred' (sviatoi), suggesting that men's behaviour is blasphemous. When criticising men for failing to respect the laws created by nature, where there is no social discrimination between the sexes, the author explicitly associates nature with the female. Calling her a mother, she attributes to Nature the role of a supreme female entity which has created the fundamental laws which govern relationships between the sexes:

Природа — мать правдива;  
Ко всем она равна.

*As a mother, nature's fair,  
She treats us equally,*

Using Sentimentalism's elevated view of nature, Bolotnikova makes her point about the natural equality of the sexes, questioning the 'sexual contract', to use

Carole Pateman's term. In Bolotnikova's work, nature stands for authority, whereas in Sentimentalist literature it is typically conceptualised as an element which may be praised but must nevertheless be transcended. This is true for works by both male and female writers. Karamzin's *Bednaia Liza* (Poor Liza) represents woman as having a high affinity to nature; nevertheless, her material interests are eventually considered to be of lesser importance than the protagonist's. In its description of the earth enduring the attacks of a storm, Mariia and Elizaveta Moskvina's poem 'Buriia' (The Storm) associates nature with subordination, as outlined in Chapter Two.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Pospelova regards nature as the daughter of an omnipotent male creator. Her poems reproduce a passive image of nature which reflects the universal order created by God. Woman and nature are perceived to be subordinate to man and culture.

The way in which Bolotnikova associates nature with authority rather than subordination suggests that she has re-conceptualised some aspects of Sentimentalist discourse, such as the high regard for nature, using Sentimentalism's fascination with nature to question social inequality between men and women. Her representation of Mother Nature as an influential legal entity—the female connotation of nature symbolising authority rather than subordination—challenges common Sentimentalist notions, overthrowing the patriarchal hierarchy of man and culture ruling over nature and woman.

The lyrical persona in 'A Reproach to Men' further accuses men of having usurped creativity for themselves, criticising the passive role assigned to women:

Почто же мысль кичлива  
К вам в голову взошла,  
  
Что будто бы возможно  
Одним вам чудеса творить? —  
Но нам зачем же должно  
Капризы переносить?

*How can it be you've come to think  
Such arrogant thoughts as these?*

*How could it be the case that you  
Alone work miracles?  
And why is it we have to bear  
The brunt of your caprice?*

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20 Mariia Moskvina / Elizaveta Moskvina: *Aoniia ili sobranie stikhotvorenii*. Universitetskaiia tipografiia: Moscow 1802. 'Buriia', p. 27.

The criticism articulated here challenges Karamzin's concept of writing, according to which it was women's main function to inspire, but not to create, poetry. It is a view clearly expressed, for instance, in his 'Poslanie k zhenshchinam' (Epistle to Women, 1795). As Wendy Rosslyn observes, one stanza compares women to the moon, which 'has no light of its own and only reflects the sun.'<sup>21</sup> Bolotnikova's accusation in 'A Reproach to Men' exposes the Sentimentalist notion of authorship which regards women as Creation's innately good and spiritually pure but empty vessels merely able to reflect their natural environment. In particular, it subverts the notion that any literary work inevitably reflects the will of a male God, and that the female author's creative energy cannot engender literary output.

### **'An Answer to an Epistle to Women'**

'Otvét na poslanie k zhenshchinam' (An Answer to an Epistle to Women) also represents a divergence from Bolotnikova's considerable number of elegiac poems. It is a socio-critical poem which challenges some aspects of the Sentimentalist cult of femininity. The title indicates that the author is replying to a letter from someone she does not name. In a footnote to the title, Bolotnikova explains that the poem is a response to an unpublished epistle whose first two lines she provides, and whose author she calls 'G. Sochinitel'' (Mr. Author):

Г. Сочинитель еще не издал в свет своего творения под заглавием: Послание к женщинам. В сем послании видеть можно лесть в высшей степени. Оно начинается так:

Женщин милых в свет рожденье  
Есть награда от богов и проч.

*The author has not yet published his work entitled 'Epistle to Women'. In that epistle is found the highest degree of flattery. It starts thus:*

*Birth of gentle women on earth  
Is a gift from the gods. (And so on)*<sup>22</sup>

While 'An Answer to an Epistle to Women' may well have been Bolotnikova's response to a poem received in private correspondence, the title closely echoes Karamzin's 'Epistle to Women' (1796, re-published in 1803 and 1814), three years prior to the publication of her own work, and she may well have read Karamzin's poem

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21 Wendy Rosslyn: *Anna Bunina (1774–1829) and the Origins of Women's Poetry in Russia*. Mellen: Lewiston 1997, p. 31.

22 Bolotnikova, 'Otvét na poslanie k zhenshchinam', pp. 52–55. This poem in Russian and its English translation can be found in the Appendix.  
Translation by Emily Lygo.

in its 1814 edition.<sup>23</sup> Her reason for using the pseudonym ‘Mr. Author’ may have been to avoid direct confrontation with a renowned author, which would have been considered unseemly in a woman. Presumably for the same reason, Bolotnikova’s footnote does not give a verbatim quote from the passage in Karamzin’s ‘Epistle to Women’. However, both it and the text she does quote represent women as objects of adoration.

Alternatively, Bolotnikova may have invented the epistle in question, in which case her aim would have been not so much a polemic based on one specific poem than to challenge an entire value system, including the Sentimentalist elevation of women. Bolotnikova’s poem attacks many of the values supported by Karamzin. It criticises a culture which claimed to be particularly attentive to women’s concerns but actually did very little of the kind. Bolotnikova uses the lines she quotes to voice her criticism more sharply. Her poem begins like this:

Когда бы все так почитали  
Наградой женщин от небес;  
То меньше б в свете мы страдали  
И каждый свой имел бы вес.

*If everyone was of the mind  
That women are a gift from God,  
We’d suffer less while on this earth,  
And have our own authority.*

Bolotnikova’s use of the conditional ‘If’ (Kogda by) at the beginning underscores the hypothetical nature of Karamzin’s programme, exposing literature’s proclaimed elevated regard for women as a sham. In her wish that ‘[we] have our own authority’, her narrator calls for a world of gender equality.

The poem continues with the exclamation that boundless happiness would reign if men only respected women as much as they claim to do; several Sentimentalist clichés of femininity follow, reproducing Sentimentalist man’s protestations of how greatly he honours women, how they are the centre of all his attention, and what an elevated place they occupy in his world:

Так! женщину щитают  
Рулеткой на земном шару;  
Сего дня дерзостно ругают,  
А завтра вознесут — в жару —

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23 Nikolai Karamzin: *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii*. Iurii Lotman (ed.). Sovetskii pisatel’: Leningrad 1966, p. 391.

В жару и Олтари нам строят,  
Название Ангелов дают;  
Клянутся, в страсти пылкой ноят,  
Источник даже слез лиют.

*Yes! Now they think of women like  
A roulette wheel upon this earth.  
One day they curse them brazenly,  
Then elevate them, gripped by ardour.*

*In ardour they build altars to us,  
They call us by the name of Angel;  
They swear, they moan in fiery passion,  
Even weep a flood of tears.*

Men are accused of hypocrisy because their declarations of pure reverence for women are untrue. The symbolic elevation of women, Bolotnikova argues, has failed to produce human relationships based on mutual esteem. Although men assert that they adore women even more than angels, their behaviour is inconsistent:

Но лишь подунул ветерочик:  
Погас огонь уж страстный весь,  
Как будто резвой матылиочек,  
В долине скрылся и исчез. —

*It only takes a wind to blow:  
The flame of passion's soon put out,  
As though a playful moth flew by  
Hid in a valley, disappeared.*

‘An Answer to an Epistle to Women’ highlights the failure of Sentimentalism to create a new type of man who understands and can empathise with women, which would result in a culture in which women enjoy greater social power. In contrast with the gentle tone and idealising tendencies of Karamzin’s epistle, Bolotnikova’s poem is angry and disillusioned, characteristics at odds with the Sentimentalist view of women.

For all its criticism of the failed feminisation of culture, Bolotnikova’s ‘An Answer to an Epistle to Women’ did support the elevated Sentimentalist appreciation of the private sphere with its corresponding ideal of domestic happiness. As mentioned in Chapter One, many women welcomed the shift in focus from the public to the private sphere stipulated by Sentimentalist discourse, which gave meaning to their chief domain of life even if it effectively excluded them from public influence. In parts of Karamzin’s ‘An Epistle to Women’, the male narrator defends this view by declaring that he has turned his back on the pursuit of

public rewards, preferring to spend time in the company of kind-hearted women instead. It is a view likewise endorsed by Bolotnikova's 'An Answer to an Epistle to Women,' which asks men to abandon the pursuit of worldly vanities such as wealth and rank, and to focus on their domestic lives. The poem claims that life will become an earthly paradise if men's main concern is to please their beloved:

В объятиях супруги милой,  
В кругу малюточек своих,  
Где можно жить лишь дружбы силой  
И исполнять свой долг для них.

*It's in the arms of your beloved,  
Encircled by your little ones,  
Where you live on the strength of friendship,  
Do your duty for them all.*

Unlike Karamzin's 'An Epistle to Women,' however, Bolotnikova's poem expresses regret that this ideal is a far cry from reality.

Men's behaviour in marriage and courtship is an important topic in Bolotnikova's 'An Answer to an Epistle to Women.' While supporting Karamzin's opinion that marriage should be based on natural inclinations and on the spouses' faithfulness to each other, it also criticises men's courtship behaviour like that of a 'playful moth.' Bolotnikova revises and reassigns the metaphor of the moth or butterfly, which has commonly been associated to women, by applying it to male caprice and fickleness.

'An Answer to an Epistle to Women' challenges the patriarchal view of conjugal life upheld in some of Karamzin's writings. Despite certain progressive features displayed in some parts of 'An Epistle to Women,' other writings of his also suggest that he wanted to conserve a patriarchal social order, both in the private and in the public realms, even opting for the extension of patriarchal rights to society as a whole. For example, as Andreas Schönle has pointed out, Karamzin relates an incident in a Swiss village in his *Letters of a Russian Traveller*, where the narrator encourages the locals to deal with a young criminal as a father would if he had to punish his own child. To use Schönle's words, public life becomes a 'semiprivate patriarchal sphere'.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, Bolotnikova's 'An Answer to an Epistle to Women' suggests that it is the 'the strength of friendship' (lish' druzhby siloi) which brings about domestic happiness. In this regard, her poem celebrates equality within

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24 Andreas Schönle: 'The Scare of the Self'. *Slavic Review*, 57 (4), 1998, pp. 723–746 (especially pp. 736–737).

the private sphere, questioning the sexual contract which persists in the work by writers such as Karamzin. Her attitude more closely resembles that of Radishchev, who expressed his criticism of serfdom in Russia in *Puteshestvie iz Peterburga v Moskvu* (Journey from Petersburg to Moscow). As Joe Andrew argues without necessarily including the relationship between spouses, Radishchev regarded mutual respect rather than patriarchal prerogatives as the natural regulators within the family.<sup>25</sup>

Going a step further, Bolotnikova explicitly extends the concept of friendship to include the married couple, perhaps inspired by the egalitarian ideals which circulated during the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when many aristocrats questioned the autocratic political order, the institution of serfdom, and the social inequality of women. Bolotnikova applies these egalitarian principles in her call for a relationship between spouses which makes the wife a companion and moral equal to her husband. In doing so, Bolotnikova uses the democratic potential inherent in the concept of friendship, a concept which seriously questions the Russian family's traditional hierarchical structure, to elevate the standing of women in the private sphere.

In 'An Answer to an Epistle to Women', Bolotnikova makes some allusions to the prevalent Sentimentalist image of women as credulous creatures in literary works such as Karamzin's *Poor Liza*. For example, she asserts that if a naive and innocent young woman believes the words of a fickle man, she will suffer endless misery:

Но коль невинная решится  
Коварным сим словам внимать;  
Пошла страдать, пошла крушиться,  
Конца печалям не видать! —

*And if the innocent girl decides  
To listen to these cunning words,  
She's doomed to suffer, doomed to grieve,  
She'll never see an end to woes.*

Bolotnikova's description of the fate of a fallen girl attacks men for their irresponsible and heartless behaviour. Her narrator strongly disapproves of dandies who regard courting as a game to bolster male self-esteem. She suggests that

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25 Joe Andrew: 'Radical Sentimentalism or Sentimental Radicalism? A Feminist Approach to Eighteenth-Century Russian Literature'. In: Kelly, Catriona et al. (eds): *Discontinuous Discourses in Modern Russian Literature*. Macmillan: London 1989, pp. 136–156.



men should stop viewing women as objects of desire, instead treating them with respect. She calls on men to practice the Sentimentalist topos of sincerity and to be sincere not only when pouring the stirrings of their soul into a literary work, but also when dealing with real women.

Bolotnikova's work takes at face value and transfers into real life the Sentimentalist notion of psychological introspection. Unlike Sentimentalist writers such as Karamzin, her motivation is to produce changes in relations between the sexes rather than to depict the painful results of a failed romance. At the end of 'A Response to an Epistle to Women', in a deliberate effort to revise the image of the naive and innocent girl doomed to misery she had conjured up in her poem, 'Rose, Violet and Amaranth', Bolotnikova issues a warning to men and women alike:

Огнем кто больно обожжется,  
Тот будет дуть и на людей. —

*If you're badly burned by fire,  
You'll start to blow on other people.*

The corresponding English proverb, 'Once bitten, twice shy', uses different imagery to illustrate the same situation. The lines in Bolotnikova's poem are a variation on a Russian proverb:

Ожѣгшись на молоке, будешь дуть и на воду.

*[People who have been] scalded by milk [will] blow on water.*

Bolotnikova substitutes 'people' for 'milk' or 'water', emphasising the fact that precautionary measures are made necessary by misbehaving individuals. Her variation on the proverb challenges the Sentimentalist image of the credulous and naive girl. She asserts that women are capable of learning from bad experiences and will stop falling for insincere promises. The poem revises the model typified in Karamzin's *Poor Liza* of the desperate young girl who commits suicide when she finds out that she has been betrayed.

## 'The Dog and the Lamb'

Bolotnikova's fable, 'Sobaka i iagnenok' (The Dog and the Lamb), is the final poem in the collection.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to her elegiac poems, the fable contains a socio-critical element and, in this regard, resembles other poems analysed in this chapter.

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26 Bolotnikova, 'Sobaka i iagnenok', pp. 58–60. This poem in Russian and its English translation can be found in the Appendix.

A hungry dog scours an idyllic landscape in search of food, here an unusual vegetarian mixture of grass and hay. The narrator expresses astonishment to be living in a time when dogs want to eat food usually consumed only by horses, cows, and lambs. No sooner does the dog become aware of a lamb grazing peacefully nearby than it attacks and almost kills the herbivore, releasing it at the last moment and warning it never again to eat 'dog food'. The narrator concludes by observing that dogs are evil because they deprive lambs of their fodder even though they are not interested in eating it themselves.

The dog's aggressive behaviour is a traditionally male characteristic. The lamb's innocence and defencelessness, on the other hand, is associated with the frailty, gentleness and meekness ascribed to women in a patriarchal culture, and evoking Christ and Christian doctrine. Projecting them onto women, Sentimentalism accords particular importance to these values.

The fable signals the incipient decline of the trend towards the 'feminisation' of culture at the time of writing. The trend was superseded by Romantic ideals and revolutionary projects, which required their male literary characters to display more masculine features. Describing male attempts at 'feminisation' as a ridiculous and malicious charade, it can be read as an allegory of the tendency of Sentimentalist man to 'feminise' himself, and can also be interpreted as an allegory about male and female spheres of existence. The male invades a territory which was idyllic before he disturbed it with an activity which runs against his nature. It may be the dog's duty to guard the lambs, not to attack them for their natural grazing behaviour. The male's decision to obtain a type of food unsuitable to him does not make sense; it is an artificial act that threatens the female, disrupting the natural order of things.

It is unlikely for Bolotnikova to be arguing for a social system which keeps men and women apart to such an extent that interaction becomes impossible. Given that the dog in her fable cannot really enjoy herbivore food, her fable criticises thoughtless male incursion into the domain of women. Male aspirations to appropriate what is foreign to male nature are represented as an act of aggression, one which occurs under the guise of 'feminisation'. Despite men's claims to have become 'feminised' during the Sentimentalist era, women may still not assume positions of public authority. Bolotnikova's fable suggests that men have access to a domain which belongs to women, whereas women cannot escape the social role assigned to them.

## 'My Butler's Thoughts'

Another one of a few socio-political poems in Bolotnikova's collection, 'My Butler's Thoughts' focuses on the Sentimentalist woman reader.<sup>27</sup> The poem suggests that Russian noblewomen were expected to take good care of their estates, instructing their stewards and managing estate affairs, and that—if and when they failed to do so—they met with disapproval. The poem also illustrates the conflict between female Russian estate managers and the Sentimentalist ideal which favours female domesticity, preferring women to be engaged in personal pursuits away from the public sphere.

Here Bolotnikova adopts some elements from contemporary drama, including a butler who, in his soliloquy, disapproves of his mistress' interest in reading so great that she forgets to manage her estate. As has been described in Chapter Two, the butler frequently appears in contemporary comic opera, often in an interlude, to comment on the behaviour of his superiors before the main action of the play resumes. The illusion of a play in Bolotnikova's poem is reinforced by the fact that the butler addresses the reader in direct speech.

Bolotnikova's intention in using such dramatic elements may have been to evoke the image of an avid female consumer of Sentimentalist literature reading in front of imaginary spectators. The poem opens with the butler's remark that his mistress spends her nights reading:

Скоро свечка так сгарает?  
Ванька, слышу я, спросил;  
Видно барыня читает  
Всё Глафиру и Камин.

*Will the candle burn down soon,  
I heard how Vanka asked,  
Her ladyship must still be reading  
Glafira and Kamin.*

Using a device which reproduces a Sentimentalist stereotype and imposes self-critical distance, the opening puts the poem's female reader on a stage, where the audience sees her through the butler's eyes. The poem also reflects on the image of the female reader: Bolotnikova revises the cliché of woman as a passive consumer of literature who merely absorbs other people's productions, presenting us

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27 Bolotnikova, 'Razsuzhdenie moego Dvoret'skago', pp. 18–22. The entire poem in Russian and its English translation can be found in the Appendix. Translation by Emily Lygo.

instead with the image of a woman capable of standing her ground outside the Sentimentalist female paradigm.

The image of the woman reader provides the frame for the butler's further reflections on the tasks assigned to the serfs of the estate while his mistress spends her time idly reading Sentimentalist books.

Bolotnikova's 'My Butler's Thoughts' is a woman's contribution to a new literary approach. During the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the character of the serf began to eclipse the pastoral characters of the shepherd and the agricultural worker (see Chapter Two); literary focus began to shift on workers and their lives, and on the relationships between them and their masters.

Like his literary predecessor, the butler in Bolotnikova's poem lists the numerous daily tasks expected of him and the other household and estate serfs. They are busy reaping and threshing the corn and ploughing the fields. The cook is constantly busy preparing meals, of up to a dozen dishes, and never has a single day off from his hectic job. Meanwhile, their mistress does nothing but read books and, like other landowners, leads a perfectly carefree life: tea is brought to her upon waking; breakfast is ready no sooner than she gets up; the luxury of drinking imported wine at lunch-time is commonplace. Landowners indulge in the kind of idle life for which the pastoral used to criticise corrupt town-dwellers. Domestic servants such as the butler worry continually that other serfs might break something or steal it from the household; all serfs live in fear of being beaten by their masters. In the evening the serfs are exhausted and are glad to go to bed early. Unlike their mistress, they do not have the time to indulge in reading or other leisure activities.

Unlike Bunina, whose pastorals feature shepherdesses feasting on bread and milk, Bolotnikova describes nature in more realistic terms, including peasants subsisting on bland cabbage soup and dark bread, transforming the pastoral's *locus amoenus* into a harsh, unforgiving place.

What inspired Bolotnikova's 'My Butler's Thoughts' and, in particular, her use of the character of the butler? His complaints about the year-long hard work expected of the serfs resemble those of similar characters in Ivan Khemnitser's fables and comic operas by Mikhail Popov or Nikolai L'vov (see Chapter Two). May we infer that she occasionally attended opera performances and may not have led quite as secluded a life as her authorial self-representation claims?<sup>28</sup> Very little is known about the extent of her contacts in major cities; the fact

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28 I am indebted to Elena Kukushkina from *Pushkinskii Dom* in St Petersburg for drawing my attention to this possibility.

that she published her work in Moscow and attended a literary evening presided by Dolgorukii does not provide sufficient evidence of her involvement in urban cultural circles.

'My Butler's Thoughts' may also have been inspired by poems critical of serfdom published in contemporary journals, which underscore peasants' ceaseless work and the fact that they were forced to labour more for others than for themselves and were allowed no leisure time.

Bolotnikova's innovative contribution to this literary trend consists in her combination of the topos of the serf with that of the woman reader. Not only does her poem represent the mistress of the house rather than the master usually portrayed in this type of literature, she also shows her female protagonist in a then typical occupation, i.e. the reading of Sentimentalist novels.

Although it highlights the effects of a social system based on serfdom, the seemingly progressive surface of Bolotnikova's 'My Butler's Thoughts' conceals a conservative message.<sup>29</sup> Here, compassion plays an important role since it was a fundamental element in Sentimentalist ethics, and its effects were both beneficial and detrimental for underprivileged members of society. As outlined in Chapter Two, while compassion drew attention to the life of social groups other than the ruling class, it also served to assuage the guilty conscience of those in power, thereby impeding social change. Bolotnikova may well draw the reader's attention to the serfs' many and exhausting tasks, but she does not call for a fundamental change in the social power relations between landowner and serf. If the butler's main complaint is about the fact that his mistress spends her time idly reading, he does not question the clearly-defined traditional roles of the master and mistress of an estate, which he outlines as follows:

Говорят, что не читали  
В старину-то Господа;  
А их хлеб, соль все знавали,  
Но не та теперь пора.

Все в Поэзию пустились;  
Звезды все хотят считать;  
Мнят, что очень просветились,  
А хозяйство? — не им знать!

*They say that in the olden days  
The masters never read,*

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29 I am indebted to A. Zorin from University of Oxford for drawing my attention to this perspective.

*We knew they'd share their bread and salt,  
But now those days are passed.*

*It's all been lost to poetry,  
They're all off counting stars,  
It seems as though they're now much wiser,  
But run the farm? No chance.*

The butler accepts—maintains, even—the traditional social hierarchy, protesting only against the fact that his mistress does not live up to her expected role. In his view, every human being has his or her place in society, and should act accordingly. He does not aspire to a higher standing, quite the reverse: he wants to keep his traditional place. Its ostensible social criticism notwithstanding, Bolotnikova's 'My Butler's Thoughts' upholds the traditional social order. Like her contemporaries, Bolotnikova refrains from questioning existing power relations too fundamentally. Rather, her poem can be interpreted as an expression of the guilt which plagued the privileged classes, including women writers, readers, and estate managers.

## Summary

In this chapter I have drawn attention to an author who, as a provincial woman (Savkina uses the word 'provintsialka'), was doubly marginalised, both as a female writer and as a woman living in the provinces. Bolotnikova's image of salon culture is strongly influenced by the Sentimentalist topos of human insincerity. This makes it difficult to assume that she would have been a frequent presence at any salon.

In creating her self-image as an author, Bolotnikova employs the Sentimentalist elevation of woman and nature, adapting them to the provincial woman poet. In order to achieve publication of her works, she declares that her works are not intended for a wider audience and bestowing the role of (symbolic) mentor on Dolgorukii, thereby ostensibly conforming to conventional Sentimentalist modesty. In her approach, and in the way in which she refers to Dolgorukii in a poem dedicated to him, she nevertheless oversteps a woman writer's boundaries. Most of Bolotnikova's poems address an important element of Sentimentalist discourse, i.e. the cult of friendship, a theme she combines with the pattern of the elegy, in which a man usually deplores the absence of his beloved, or being rejected by her.

The main focus of this chapter has been on the poems in which Bolotnikova voices criticism of some of the socio-political problems which were being discussed more intensely during the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including the unconditional value of all human beings, the high importance of the notion

of femininity, and the situation of the serfs. Bolotnikova exploits Sentimentalism's inherent democratic potential in order to question social inequality between men and women, using vocabulary inspired by the political climate of her time, for instance comparing a woman to a prisoner.

Some of Bolotnikova's other poems question the Sentimentalist 'feminisation' of culture. Her narrator disapproves of the high praise of femininity while women continue to be considered men's social inferiors. In particular, she dissociates herself from the Sentimentalist image of women as emotional creatures unable to learn from experience. In presenting nature as an authoritative mother who creates laws about the equality of the sexes, she also challenges the Sentimentalist association of woman and nature with subordination.

Finally, Bolotnikova's work features the topos of the serf who complains about his situation. While it can be found in many fables and comic operas at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is Bolotnikova's innovation to combine it with the image of the Sentimentalist woman reader. In giving a voice to the serf without fundamentally questioning his social position, Bolotnikova imitates the superficial criticism of serfdom found in numerous contemporary authors.

Bolotnikova's remoteness from cultural centres was certainly a disadvantage in her endeavours to achieve acceptance as a writer. I would argue, however, that it was chiefly her lack of contact with established literary institutions which gave her the freedom to raise such unconventional and challenging topics as the social oppression of women, or the hypocritical praise of women and femininity by Sentimentalist men. It is unlikely that a poem such as 'A Reproach to Men' would have been read at a convention of *Beseda liubitelei rossiskogo slova*, the Society of Lovers of the Russian Word, or that Anna Volkova could have written 'An Answer to an Epistle to Women' under her father's tutelage.

Albeit minor, Bolotnikova's criticism of the (sexual) discrimination which shaped her culture is an important early step towards the creation of awareness of social and gender inequality in Russia.

