

Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to explore women authors' responses to Sentimentalist literary conventions as they manifested themselves in Russia in the late 18th and during the first two decades of the 19th century. In particular, the study has shed light on the lives and works of three Russian women writers who have so far been marginalised or overlooked by literary history. Their writings reveal various ways in which women perceived, and responded to, their society's political, cultural, and aesthetic concepts.

Inspired largely by the writings of republican thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, these concepts included the creation of a public world of politics for men, and a private world of feelings for women, as well as a belief in democratic and egalitarian principles which led to an increasing popularity of the notion of the unconditional value of each human and, hence, to a critical view of the institution of serfdom and of the social inequality of women. However, increasing criticism of the latter did not bring about fundamental revisions of traditional gender patterns.

On a cultural level, salons offered a platform for intellectual exchange for both sexes. In literature, Sentimentalism's essentialist assumptions manifested themselves in the worship of nature, a belief that women were alienated from culture and had a duty to embody harmony and virtue. These values found their most prominent expression in the genre of the pastoral, where the traditional function of female characters was to arouse male poetic feelings.

Sentimentalist nature worship is reflected in works by women writers such as Mariia Pospelova, who reproduced deistic and pantheistic ideals and who considered the poet to be a virtuous interpreter of Creation. Pospelova adopted the idealised Sentimentalist image of femininity, presenting her female personae—including the authorial narrator—as angelic creatures receptive to Creation's divine essence and capable of experiencing spiritual illumination. While this conceptualisation of her narrators gave Pospelova symbolic authority and legitimacy as a writer, it disabled her, however, from articulating conflict. In her pastorals, feelings of disharmony and distress are only expressed by the male voice. Female literary characters, by contrast, express such feelings only in moralising reflections which eventually re-establish woman's function of symbolising happiness and paradise.

Another chapter focused on Mariia Bolotnikova and the use which this provincial woman poet made of the Sentimentalist elevation of nature and woman's

alleged alienation from culture to justify her taking up the pen despite living far from any of Russia's cultural centres. My analysis of her poems suggests that they enabled her to voice her opinion on subjects which would have been difficult for her to address in any other genre. In particular, I have examined Bolotnikova's references to the then hotly-debated egalitarian principles which exemplify echoes of the democratic potential of Sentimentalism in works by other women writers, and the opportunities for feminist criticism provided by those debates.

Unlike Pospelova, Bolotnikova used Sentimentalism's elevated regard for nature as an argument to support her call for a relationship between the sexes based on mutual respect rather than patriarchal authority; she questions Sentimentalist men's idealisation of femininity, exposing elements of Sentimentalist discourse which objectify women in a way similar to Western European courtly love. She challenges the Karamzin-inspired image of women as naive girls unable to learn from bad experiences. It is only in her attitude to serfdom that Bolotnikova's progressive criticism of a patriarchal system falters. While she does give a voice to a serf dissatisfied with his idle mistress, her writings do not suggest that she wished to see fundamental changes to the social system. In fact, she can be said to adopt the attitude common among the contemporary ruling class.

The work of Anna Naumova constitutes a considerable departure from the Sentimentalist equation of woman with nature. My analysis of her poems shows the author taking issue with Sentimentalist man over his simplified view of women as carefree country maidens, deconstructing the topos of the shepherdess who knows no sorrow, serves mainly as an object for the man's elegiac monologues, and blossoms like a flower in an idyllic setting. In one response to the imitation of a Sentimentalist love idyll, she upbraids the male protagonist for cultivating unrealistic ideas about women. Elsewhere, she reproaches the man for not questioning his own courtship behaviour while accusing his beloved of being callous and unfaithful. Just like Bolotnikova, for whom a harmonious matrimonial life was an important topic, Naumova is also concerned about the impact of courtship and marriage on women's lives. However, rather than emulating Karamzin in casting women as victims by showing pity for a fallen girl, Naumova's narrator advises women to be mindful when choosing a husband. In doing so, she was most likely inspired by salon and friendship-album culture, where these topics were frequently addressed.

Naumova further challenges Sentimentalist representations of female characters by dissociating herself from the myth of Sappho's death. Her narrator declares that she prefers to write, taking inspiration from disappointment, rather than ending her life in an ocean of oblivion, as the legend about the Greek poet suggests. Here Naumova reverses Sentimentalist gender roles according to which

woman was the mute object of adoration by a man deploring the absence of his beloved in elegiac monologues. In Naumova's poetry, woman is encouraged to voice emotional conflict; the man is deprived of this traditional privilege.

Moreover, in Naumova's work, the female character of the 'writing muse' is transformed from Sentimentalism's gentle and receptive interpreter of Creation into a fervent teacher of virtue. The muse is an outspoken woman who has ventured into the world to expose people's hypocrisy and lecture them about their unnatural behaviour in society. Naumova embraces Christianity's egalitarian aspect by appealing to all, regardless of rank or gender, to strive for moral self-perfection.

Presenting her protagonist as a perfectly virtuous woman was one of the ways in which a woman author was able to uphold the Christian value system cherished by Sentimentalist pietists while nevertheless crossing the boundaries between her private sphere and the public arena of authorship. As the works of both Pospelova and Naumova demonstrate, however, this did result in excessively moralising tones.

While Pospelova's female characters were set in idyllic landscapes and functioned as interpreters of a world created by a male God, Naumova has revised the subordinate role of woman. In some of her poems, ancient matriarchal and pagan folk practices clash with Christianity's patriarchal belief system: the authoritative folk character of Baba Yaga adopts a Christian guise; popular divination rituals illustrate the importance of Fate as the personification of existential individual uncertainties experienced in the emerging Romanticism. Challenging the Sentimentalist image of the female protagonist who is not in control of her life and who dies having failed to live up to the expectations of a male-dominated culture, Naumova's portrayal of Fate presents an authoritative female character who is in charge of the entire universe and, in a manner reminiscent of the ancient Fates, determines the turns of human lives.

I would argue that Fate in Naumova's writings functions as an opponent both to the idealised Sentimentalist image of femininity and to the masculinist ideals of emerging Romanticism. The disruptive female character of Fate was Naumova's reaction to a civic brotherhood in a republican state which, in Machiavelli's and Rousseau's writings, served as a defence against the private and the feminine. Fate, the epitome of irrationality attributed to women, was regarded as a threat to the stability of the republican order, resulting in efforts to confine women to the contrasting moulds of angel or madwoman, not to mention the far more ancient dichotomy of woman as either Eve or angel, Holy Mother Mary or Jezebel the whore. In allowing Fate to escape from her confinement, Naumova presents an alternative to the gender-specific dichotomy created by male republican political philosophers. She suggests that humans try to act within the limits of their circumstances

and do not attempt to control the vagaries of life by putting unrealistic expectations upon one sex. She also encourages readers to learn from life's lessons rather than resorting to Sentimentalism's radical gender paradigm which forces women to give up their existence if they come into conflict with the Sentimentalist ideal of female naturalness.

The history of Russian literature has addressed the question of the natural and spontaneous nature of woman's artistic creation on numerous occasions. I would like to conclude my study with the following observations, which apply across and beyond the 19th century.

Women have often been criticised for taking an excessively rational approach to writing. For instance, a critic condemned a poem composed by Anna Bunina on the death of a woman friend, saying that it was a reflection on life and death rather than the more appropriate expression of womanly sentiment.¹ However, it was not only men who reproached women authors for a lack of emotion in their writings. As the polemics between Evdokiia Rostopchina and Karolina Pavlova illustrate, women disapproved of works by other women writers for the same reasons. Rostopchina held that poetry should be the result of a spontaneous outpouring of emotion rather than of intellectual work, and should originate in the female domain of salon life.² In the early 20th century a similar type of argument developed between Anna Akhmatova and Nadezhda L'vova. In her overview of the emergence of women's writing in Russia, 'Kholod utra' (The Dawn Chill, 1914), L'vova faults Akhmatova's poems for sometimes lacking formal mastery.³ In a review of L'vova, Akhmatova counters the reproach, claiming that L'vova had 'destroyed her tender talent' by forcing her thoughts into specific poetic forms.⁴

These examples show that women have felt ill at ease with either conceptualisation of them: on the one hand, women's social experiences often diverge from those of men; they require a different approach to artistic creation, with regard to both content and form. On the other hand, not least because 'female' spheres

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- 1 N. Brodskii: *Literaturnye salony i kruzhki. Pervaia polovina XIX veka*. Academia: Leningrad 1930; repr. Olms: Zürich 1984, p. 25.
 - 2 Judith Vowles: 'The Inexperienced Muse. Russian Women and Poetry in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century'. In: Barker, Adele / Gheith, Jehanne (eds): *A History of Women's Writing in Russia*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2002, pp. 62–84 (p. 75).
 - 3 Nadezhda L'vova: 'Kholod utra. Neskol'ko slov o zhenskome tvorchestve'. *Zhatva* 5, 1914, pp. 249–256 (p. 255).
 - 4 Anna Akhmatova: 'O stikhakh N. L'vovoi'. *Russkaia mysl'* 35, 1914, pp. 27–28 (p. 28).

and topics are regarded as secondary to the public sphere, women refuse to be confined to them.

My study has been an attempt to identify early manifestations of this dilemma in the works of Sentimentalist women authors. I have provided examples of women writers who subscribe to this dichotomy, and of women who use or reject certain elements of it. I hope to have portrayed them in a light that does not cast them in the role of victims, presenting them instead as authors who operated skilfully and autonomously within the codes and confines imposed by the discourse of their time.

