

SLAVISCHE LITERATUREN

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47

Ursula Stohler

Disrupted Idylls

Nature, Equality, and the Feminine
in Sentimentalist Russian Women's Writing
(Mariia Pospelova, Mariia Bolotnikova,
and Anna Naumova)

With translations by Emily Lygo



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The study provides a close analysis of literary works by women in late-18th- and early-19th-century Russia, with a focus on Anna Naumova, Mariia Pospelova, and Mariia Bolotnikova. Political, social and feminist theories are applied to examine restrictions imposed on women. Women authors in particular were fettered by a culture of feminisation strongly influenced by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As Sentimentalism and its aesthetics began to give way to Romantic ideals, some provincial Russian women writers saw an opportunity to claim social equality, and to challenge traditional concepts of authorship and a view of women as mute and passive.

Ursula Stohler, University of Zurich, has a PhD from the University of Exeter, UK. She specialises in gender and transcultural studies, education, digital humanities, Czech literature and Russian studies, and has done research at universities in several countries as well as giving numerous talks.

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Abstract

This study explores the ways in which Russian women writers responded to Sentimentalist conventions of authorship, challenging their conceptualisation of women as mute and passive beings. Its particular focus is on the works by Anna Naumova, Mariia Pospelova, and Mariia Bolotnikova, three late-18th- and early-19th-century Russian women authors who have only recently begun to receive some slight scholarly attention from Western European researchers in Russian Women's Studies.

The study not only provides a close literary analysis of the writings by these women, it also applies political, social, and feminist theory, examining both the pitfalls and the opportunities encountered by women authors operating in the context of a Sentimentalist culture of feminisation strongly influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings. It argues that, while restricting women to essentialist conceptions, Sentimentalist discourse also offered female authors a means of acquiring symbolic authority, enabling them to claim social equality by appropriating the Sentimentalist re-evaluation of nature and the notion of natural rights.

As they created self-images as authors, legitimising their writerly activities, provincial women writers in particular referred to their alleged closeness to nature. Excluded from the public sphere of politics by Sentimentalist culture, women also took advantage of the movement's focus on and elevated appreciation of the home and the family to draw attention to concerns of a more private nature.

By examining literature produced at a time when Romantic ideals began to eclipse Sentimentalist aesthetics, the study illustrates the challenge of the Sentimentalist notion of women by several Russian women and their authoritative, autonomous and/or outspoken female characters.

