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Review: Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M. Gheith, eds., *A History of Women's Writing in Russia*

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A History of Women's Writing in Russia. Ed. Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M Gheith. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xviii, 391 pp. Notes. Bibliographies. Index. \$85.00, hard bound.

One of the first things that strikes the reader of this collection of essays tracing the history of women's writing in Russia from the medieval period to 1999 is the list of abbreviations of frequently cited works. Included in the list is an impressive number of major works on Russian women's writing—histories, conference collections, and anthologies—that have been published since 1993. This collectively authored history, edited by Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M Gheith, is a valuable addition to the growing corpus of serious scholarship on Russian women's writing.

The book contains contributions from many of the most important Anglo-American scholars in the field, including, to name but a few, Helena Goscilo, Catriona Kelly, Rosalind Marsh, Stephanie Sandler, Judith Vowles, and Mary Zirin. The introduction by Barker and Gheith does an excellent job of outlining the contributions and relating them to each other, highlighting points of overlap and contradiction, but wisely avoiding the attempt to resolve such contradictions, which enrich and enliven the reader's experience. Two things that I expected to find are missing from the introduction: an explanation of the genesis of the volume, how the contributors and the topics for their essays were chosen; and how this history relates to other works in the field, particularly Catriona Kelly's *History of Russian Women's Writing 1820–1992* (1994). These two points are related. Although the editors do not say so explicitly, it seems to have been a principled choice to make the authorship collective, not only in order to draw on a broader range of specialization but also to avoid a sense of monologic pronouncement. Kelly's work is closer to what one expects in a book entitled "A History"—it is a story told from one strong point of view. Kelly is not afraid to make value judgments or determinations about which writers are more or less important to the story she is telling and more or less influential in Russian literary history (as reflected in the space devoted to them). Barker and Gheith's story is told from multiple points of view; most of the contributors avoid value judgments or comments on technique. There are certainly advantages and disadvantages to both approaches. On the one hand, it is somewhat disconcerting to find that the undeniably great writers Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva are not more foregrounded in a work called "A History"; indeed, at times their greatness is treated as a problem, in that it causes them to overshadow other women writers (see especially the essay by Katharine Hodgson). On the other hand, this approach sheds new light on and piques one's curiosity about such little-known figures as Anna Prismanova and O. N. Ol'nev (pseud. of V. N. Tsekhovskaia). The volume does accomplish the editors' stated goal: "to recover lost literary lives, address factual gaps in our knowledge, and rethink the contexts within which women's writing has been produced" (1). If Kelly's work did not exist, I would be inclined to be more critical of the Barker and Gheith approach, which at times takes on the guise of a catalogue, but as a complement and supplement to Kelly's history it performs a needed role.

The essays range widely in time (beginning with Rosalind McKenzie's essay on medieval literature) and even geography (the writing of emigrant Russian women in Paris and in China is considered by Catherine Ciepiela and by Olga Bakich and Carol Ueland, respectively). Prose fiction and poetry are the major genres considered, although essays on autobiographical writing by Mary Zirin (for the prerevolutionary period) and Anna Krylova (for the Soviet period) are conceptually among the most interesting (and in the case of Krylova, potentially controversial). Drama is mostly ignored, understandably for the most part, although Goscilo's superb essay on post-Soviet prose could well be complemented by some consideration of the dazzling impact of the drama of Liudmila Petrushevskaja and Nina Sadur on the perestroika theater audience.

Several essays offer new and convincing interpretations: of Tsvetaeva's impact on other women writers in emigration (Ciepiela); of how women poets in the symbolist era escaped the "wife-" and "muse-function" imposed on them by male poets (Jennifer Presto); of the artistic image of Anastasiia Verbitskaia, which is revised and complicated to stunning effect (Zirin, Marsh); of the periodization of nineteenth-century prose (Gheith); and of the role of "middlebrow" literature in postwar Russia (Beth Holmgren). A few of the

thumbnail sketches of writers, although modest in length, are so vivid that they evoke an irresistible urge to revisit the works discussed (for example, Vowles on Anna Bunina, Barker on I. Grekova, and Sandler on all the late twentieth-century poets she considers).

Many of the essays incorporate archival research. The volume is well edited and includes an excellent bibliographical guide to the writers discussed, thus making it easier for the reader to indulge the desire to engage or reengage directly with the art of writers whom we should know better.

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The Daring of Derzhavin: The Moral and Aesthetic Independence of the Poet in Russia. By Anna Lisa Crone. Bloomington, Ind.: Slavica Publishers, 2001. vi, 258 pp. Appendix. Notes. Index. Figures. \$24.95, paper.

According to Aleksandr Pushkin, Gavriila Derzhavin wrote only eight poems worth remembering, and even then, "his genius wrote in Tartar" (222). What Pushkin saw fit to reject, however, later generations of Russian writers (and indeed scholars) found to be, on the contrary, an alternative model for a rougher, harsher poetic expression, one challenging to the reader raised on Pushkinian clarity and lucidity in its strangeness of language and syntax, yet inspiring in its magnificence of imagery and theme. Anna Lisa Crone, in her thorough and closely argued new study, goes a degree further than this, however, in proposing as her central thesis that Derzhavin not only provided an alternative poetics to Pushkin but preempted Pushkin (and those who celebrated him) in creating a model of the "poet-powerful," of the office of leading or national poet as "an alternative institution that better expressed [the intelligentsia's] values and aspirations, and that contributed importantly to the evolving self-definition of the national spirit" (2). Beginning with a radical questioning of the role of the poet in an imperial age, in his formulating of a polystylistic neo-odic discourse in works like "Felitsa," Derzhavin went on to free himself from subservience to the monarch and thus liberate his poetic voice from odic conventionality, and ultimately to produce a self-referential poetics that projected an image of the poet as a heroic figure equal to rulers and men (or women) of state, with "an increased focus on himself as poet and the poet's role and function as above politics and the temporal sphere" (201).

Anna Lisa Crone's study sets out, in a spirit of revisionism and challenge to received assumptions about Derzhavin's significance, to redefine his achievement in three directions: in looking at Derzhavin's poetic language, at his ethical stance, and at his conception of the role and status of the poet. Her monograph is divided into two parts, the first of these considerations dominating the analysis in the first part, and the third in the second part, while the question of Derzhavin's ethical outlook informs both parts of her work. In the first part, the discussion is primarily of a poetic, and indeed linguistic, nature; in the second, a broader, chronologically based reading is mapped out. Both sections are carefully argued and show an admirable depth of scholarship. Indeed, as well as demonstrating a mastery of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literary and intellectual background, Crone draws frequently on her knowledge of Russian modernism to explore further ramifications of Derzhavin's achievement. One wonders at times whether this bipartite division is ideal, however, and whether some greater integration of the two approaches could have been achieved; after all, Crone's argument rests fundamentally on close readings of key texts in the Derzhavinian oeuvre, so it is possible to envisage a comprehensive survey organized systematically (not necessarily chronologically) around such readings that could have covered the same ground in a more holistic approach.

Of particular value in Crone's study is her rehabilitation of neglected areas of Derzhavin's output. This is especially true of her reading of some of the poet's earliest productions, which the received critical tradition has tended to dismiss as naive and unoriginal: in works such as the "translations" of and answers to Frederick II (the so-called *Chitalaigaiskie ody*), she demonstrates their vital importance in Derzhavin's development of both