Luke Jeske, University of Florida

Women in Early Nineteenth-Century Salons: New Possibilities and Limitations

1. Introduction

In early nineteenth-century Russia, women of high society played pivotal roles within literary salon culture. They acted primarily as hostesses, organizing and orchestrating the social milieu in which writers produced and presented their works. Male writers considered women an audience of friendly critics first and foremost, which precluded women from contributing literature of their own regardless of their talents. Thus, while women achieved a certain degree of influence in social and literary circles, they ultimately deferred to the male writers.

The degree to which women exercised independence and authority in salons varied greatly among individuals. I demonstrate this by comparing the lives of Ekaterina Karamzina, whose salon promoted intellectual ideals associated with her husband, and Zinaida Volkonskaia, who employed the salon as a means of co-publishing her own literature and expressing her political sentiments. While these hostesses carved out their own distinct paths, male salon-goers significantly shaped the contradictory contours of empowerment and inequality within the salon, contributing to the rise of a highly educated if rather passive female audience.

2. Two Hostesses, Two Paths: Continuity and Independence

Ekaterina Karamzina served as a salon hostess alongside her husband Nikolai Karamzin, the seminal writer, language reformer, and historian who devoted his career to introducing European cultural ideals to Russia via literary journals and translations. As an extension of these endeavors, the Karamzins opened their own salon in St. Petersburg in 1816, although they may have held similar social gatherings in their Moscow home prior to Napoleon’s invasion of the city.
in 1812.\(^1\) Some of the leading writers of the day, including Vasily Zhukovsky and Alexander Pushkin, frequented their salon.\(^2\) Although the Karamzins spoke multiple languages, they conducted their gatherings in Russian despite the Francophone trend among the St. Petersburg nobility. The salon flourished.

In Karamzin’s *Pis’ma russkogo puteshestvennika* (*Letters of a Russian Traveller*), he vividly describes a French salon of the early 1790s:

> The hostess was sitting in a Voltaire chair; five or six chevaliers were conducting a noisy conversation around her; on the sofa two abbes occupied three ladies with their charms; several groups were scattered around the corners of the room so that the society consisted of 25 or 30 people. At 9 o’clock the hostess summoned the abbe D* ‘onto the stage.’ Everyone surrounded the sofa: the reader pulled from his pocket a little rose-colored notebook, made a witty remark and began.\(^3\)

The Karamzin salon retained the core features of the French model: a relaxed atmosphere and emphasis on social and intellectual conversation. Nikolai Karamzin himself was surely the center of attention, and discussion at the salon, and his *Letters* certainly generated extensive discourse on European mores and trends. His journal *Vestnik Evropy* (*Messenger of Europe*), which drew a readership of twelve hundred and outlived Karamzin himself, ending its run only in 1830, provided additional material for Karamzin to offer his salon guests and the public at large. Hence, Nikolai’s intellectual endeavors provided substance and unity to the Karamzins’ salon even if it *ipso facto* limited Ekaterina’s freedom to create her own image and influence in the salon.

Following Nikolai Karamzin’s death in 1826, Ekaterina, about twenty years his junior, received a pension from Tsar Nicholas I; she now possessed the means as well as the youthful

---

\(^1\) See Davydova, 235.
\(^2\) For a full list of members of the Karamzin salon, see ibid.
\(^3\) Karamzin, 336.
energy to continue her role as salon hostess. She maintained the salon with the help of her eldest daughter Sophia until her own death in 1851. Ekaterina Karamzina thrived as an independent hostess, nurturing the intellectual atmosphere that her late husband’s guests craved. The popularity of the Karamzins’ salon prior to Nikolai’s death provided Ekaterina with the social connections and experience necessary to conduct a salon successfully. As a personal acquaintance, familiar reader, and likely critic of the writers who long had gathered in the Karamzins’ home, Ekaterina knew her guests intimately and had proven that she could fulfill what writers and other guests expected of their hostess. As A. I. Koshelev recalled, Ekaterina’s reputation attracted the best and brightest literary minds in Russia: “At E. A. Karamzina’s gathered litterateurs and intelligent people of various orientations. Bludov…Zhukovsky, Pushkin, A. I. Turgenev, Khomiakov, P. Mukhanov, Titov and many others also frequented it.” At a time when secular literature and intellectualism were rapidly expanding and enthralling the Russian nobility, salons situated women like Ekaterina squarely among the sources of their development.

Ekaterina’s salon was remembered by guests as similar in form, content, and, membership to the one she shared with Nikolai. She carried on her late husband’s legacy, emphasizing discussions of world literature and European culture. Koshelev offered the following description:

In the Karamzin salon, the subject of conversation was not philosophical matters, nor was it hollow Petersburg gossip and old wives’ tales. Literature, Russian and foreign, important events in Europe—especially the activities of the then great statesmen of England, Canning and Husquisson—comprised most frequently the content of our lively talks. These soirees…refreshed and nourished our souls and minds….The hostess always directed the conversation toward interesting subjects.

---

4 See Black.
5 William Mills Todd describes Koshelev as “the former student of Merzliakov, the Slavophile and social reformer,” one of the “many who frequented both types [literary circles and salons] of gathering.” Todd, 59.
6 Quoted in ibid., 60.
7 Quoted in ibid., 59.
Koshelev’s praise for his hostess underlines the degree to which Ekaterina’s duties were predetermined by her husband’s career. She was expected to point her guests toward literary works and contemporary issues that were neither too shallow nor too esoteric, as Nikolai had done. Such expectations relegated the “independent” hostess to the shadow of her husband.

In contrast, Zinaida Aleksandrovna Volkonskaia (1789–1862) forged a path at odds with the norms of salon society. Volkonskaia differed from many salon hostesses (even Karamzina) in that she socialized within Russia’s highest circles, including the personal entourage of Emperor Alexander I. Additionally, unlike most Russian women, she began writing at an early age. Volkonskaia grew up as a “child and poetess” in Count Sergei Nikolaevich Stroganov’s salon, where her verses were read to the adult audience. Thus, Volkonskaia entered into a doubly exclusive world, as a member of Russia’s most prestigious artistic and social circles and as a representative of the extremely small number of women writers at the time. She hosted her own salon from 1824 to 1829.

Prior to opening her salon, Volkonskaia expressed her dissatisfaction with the ways in which salons and high society restricted women. Her novella Laure, published in 1819, articulates the contradictions confronting women in early nineteenth-century salons; it “investigates the social pressures, psychological motives and consequences of salon life on women.” Laure, the titular heroine, expects that her marriage to a well-connected aristocrat will elevate her to high society. Yet she encounters cold shoulders and snobbery on account of her humbler class origins. While she tries devoting herself to her children, Laure finds that motherhood cannot completely quench

---

8 See Tosi, 131–2.
9 Marsh-Flores, 51.
10 Tosi, 141.
her desire for social acceptance and intellectual stimulation. Volkonskaia’s strikingly original “psychological analysis” of salon characters reveals the impossibility of self-fulfillment for women bound to the home and the salon. She highlights neither the sympathy for human sorrow nor the moral and aesthetic response to it that characterized Russian sentimentalism, a trend still dominating popular literature at the time.\textsuperscript{11} As a result, critics attacked her work for going against sentimentalist trends with its rigorous vocabulary and use of a psychological rather than emotional lens.\textsuperscript{12} Such criticism signified the narrow ideas restricting Russian literature and especially aspiring women writers, and it effectively inhibited further discussion of Volkonskaia’s social critiques.

The question that arises, then, is why Volkonskaia opened her own salon. Upon consulting with Alessandra Tosi, a leading historian on literature and society from this period, I can offer a few possible explanations for Volkonskaia’s decision.\textsuperscript{13} As a well-educated member of the highest echelons of Russian society, Volkonskaia would not have been as socially or financially dependent as her heroine Laure and thus could integrate more easily into the cultural milieu of the salon. Alternatively, Laure may have been inspired by some of Volkonskaia’s own initial struggles entering high society—obstacles which she had largely overcome by the mid-1820s. Or, perhaps Volkonskaia penned Laure as an ironic play on the genre of the psychological narrative, satirizing not so much the salon itself but rather those people who saw it primarily as an opportunity for social mobility. Most likely, the answer lies in some combination of these three explanations and most certainly involves an additional dimension: Volkonskaia’s desire to improve her Russian-

\textsuperscript{11} See ibid., 193, 207–9.
\textsuperscript{12} See ibid., 149.
\textsuperscript{13} I would like to express my gratitude here to Alessandra Tosi, for her willingness to consult with me for this article.
language writing. Despite condemning some aspects of salon life, Volkonskaia understood that it allowed her to enter the literary world otherwise prohibited to women. Indeed, because Volkonskaia was transitioning from writing in French to Russian during the 1820s, she had a strong incentive to involve herself with the literary world of the salon, regardless of the gender barriers.\textsuperscript{14} One literary historian claims that Volkonskaia “never appeared to reject the salon and salon literature as a medium for literary production,” using it to release her writings as works of “co-authorship” with male writers.\textsuperscript{15} This allowed her to reframe her writing as a social act rather than as an independent (and thus unusual) profession.\textsuperscript{16} Therefore, establishing a salon provided her with the necessary framework to continue her literary career.

Not all of her acquaintances responded positively to her collaborative efforts, however. While preparing a play based on the life of Joan of Arc, Volkonskaia wrote to Alexander Pushkin about her work, positioning herself as a fellow writer and equal participant in the literary process. Pushkin reframed her as a muse in his reply. He and her other guests viewed Volkonskaia as “the quintessential salon hostess, ultimately successful in her role as a facilitator of literary relationships between men of letters who, without her intercession, might not have had literary relations and exchanges with certain authors.”\textsuperscript{17} While the salon connected Volkonskaia to Pushkin, it did not change his mind—or that of many other writers, for that matter—about a woman’s role in the creation of art. For Pushkin and Volkonskaia’s other guests, the hostess was a social connector and muse, not an intellectual and literary equal.

\textsuperscript{14} See Marsh-Flores, 136.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 168.
\textsuperscript{16} See ibid., 134.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 151.
Volkonskaia used those social roles to inject her own political message into her salon. She invited men deeply invested in the idea of political change in Russia who, after their failed revolt in 1825, became known as the Decembrists.\footnote{For a concise summary of the Decembrists and their revolt, see Hosking, 171–182.} In the weeks following this revolt, many of Volkonskaia’s guests were arrested and sentenced to hard labor in Siberia. At that time, Volkonskaia made a pointed political gesture when she hosted a prominent farewell party for her sister-in-law Maria Volkonskaia, who had decided to follow her Decembrist husband into Siberian exile.\footnote{See Marsh-Flores, 161.} Maria’s choice, shared by the wives of other Decembrists, had no precedent in Russian history and suggested that she sympathized with her husband’s political sentiments; having a farewell party for Maria signaled that Zinaida and her guests also shared these beliefs.\footnote{For a discussion of the Decembrists’ wives, see Mazour.} While authorities might have overlooked the “highly visible and well-publicized evening gathering dedicated to the wife of an exiled prisoner” as a one-time family affair, they could not excuse Volkonskaia’s decision to continue hosting politically provocative guests like Adam Mickiewicz, a Polish poet banished from his home region (then part of the Russian Empire) for his involvement in a nationalist student group.\footnote{Marsh-Flores, 167.} Volkonskaia clearly employed her salon as a hub of political activity. While salons, like all social circles, reflected members’ general political sympathies, Volkonskaia may have been an exception in her pointed and public utilization of her salon as a political stage. Her actions also illustrated the soft power that had been (or could be) accrued by salon hostesses. All of this contributed to her falling out of favor with Nicholas I and Russian high society and her subsequent decision to leave Russia permanently in 1829. Volkonskaia suffered

for her actions, but they revealed that she possessed the social and intellectual clout as well as the independent nature necessary to put on a public display of political resistance.

3. Writers, Mothers, Objects of Reform

The emergence of salons in Russia in the eighteenth century brought women to the fore of cultural life. As the target audience for Russian literature and as (passive) participants in cultural production, women were expected to have received superior training in European languages. The succession of eighteenth-century tsarinas—Catherine II in particular—reinforced the image of the educated Russian woman in high society. In fact, Russian women impressed foreign visitors with their displays of vast cultural knowledge. French ambassador Count Segur recalled that by the 1780s Russian noblewomen “had outstripped the men in this progressive march towards improvement: you already saw a number of elegant women and girls speaking seven or eight languages with fluency, playing several instruments, and familiar with the most celebrated poets of France, Italy and England.” Segur’s comment reveals that while Russian women’s education flourished (at least in high society) by the end of the eighteenth century, their areas of study reflected male writers’ expectations for artistic and sentimental educated women. Women were encouraged to study foreign languages and music but not politics or math. The gradual rise of noblewomen’s education yielded a class of Russian women equipped to understand and engage in conversations precisely about the topics discussed at salons.

Women likewise became the ideal readership for fledgling literary journals. Male writers striving to reform the Russian language desperately needed an audience; the reading public

---

22 While exact dates for the appearance of salons in Russia are unknown, one researcher suggests that Catherine II’s court served as a prototype for literary circles and that salons emerged at this time. See Davydova.
23 For one discussion of women writers in eighteenth-century Russia, see Kelly.
24 Quoted in Figes, 48.
remained small, and the secular literary canon was underdeveloped. In salons, however, women fulfilled this role. Eager to have their works read, writers established several literary journals aimed explicitly at women readers. Often, the very titles of such journals signified the intended audience: Zhurnal dlia milykh (Journal for Darlings, 1803), Damskii zhurnal (The Ladies’ Journal, 1806) and Aglaia (Aglaya, 1808–1812). Salons and writers thus provided educated women with materials to grant them access to the burgeoning world of Russian literature, but only within clearly defined boundaries.

In the social arts, though, women had a more pivotal and unbounded role. Salon hostesses made order out of chaos. They matched poets with inspiring ladies, high officials with the guests most up to date on European and Russian developments, and artists with potential patrons. After years and even decades in salons, hostesses greatly refined their social acuity. Lev Tolstoy depicts the industrial precision of a hostess’s conversational skill in the opening scenes of War and Peace. Anna Pavlovna Scherer presides over the most elegant and smoothly run social gatherings in Petersburg; Tolstoy describes her as “the owner of a spinning mill,” who “having put his workers in their places, strolls about the establishment, watching out for an idle spindle or the odd one squealing much too loudly.” This account of an early nineteenth-century salon, while fictional, recalls Ekaterina Karamzina’s previously-noted deft ability to direct conversation “toward interesting subjects” which “refreshed and nourished our souls and minds.”

Literature may have been the domain of men, but women mastered the arts of conversation and social interaction.

---

25 For a discussion of the growth of the reading public at the turn of the nineteenth century, see Marker.
26 See Tosi, 50–52.
27 Tolstoy, 10.
28 Koshelev, quoted in Todd, 59.
Salon hostesses’ social acumen may have earned them the admiration of their peers, but it inevitably led male writers and intellectuals to idealize them as caring, compassionate, and instructive mother figures. A sentimentalist sensibility was one of the primary factors reinforcing woman’s maternal image inside and outside the salon. Sentimentalism promoted moral well-being, especially in connection with emotional experiences. Women were considered more emotionally aware than men and thus were better qualified arbiters of morality. Furthermore, the salon straddled the public and private spheres, making it a showcase for its hostess’s maternal nature. A. P. Elagina, for example, hosted a renowned Moscow salon and fulfilled a rather matronly set of duties for her guests, including, in the words of one researcher, the “religious, moral, and aesthetic upbringing of her children” together with the “extended ‘family’ of her literary salon and especially the younger generation that constituted its core.”29 This motherly role epitomized the freedoms and restraints hostesses experienced. To instruct her guests, a hostess had to be well-educated herself, dedicated to the literary process, and deft in her social orchestration, rewarding, punishing and teaching her guests as necessary. At the same time, mothers were not social or intellectual equals, however respected they may have been. Kept at arm’s length from the center of the literary world and often discouraged from publishing any original work of her own, the hostess neither trampled on the toes of her “children” nor exposed herself to the immoral business world surrounding private publication.30 Thus, the burdensome expectations and pressures placed on women in salons coalesced into the influential figure of the hostess who educated and instructed Russia’s growing reading public and intellectual elite.

29 Bernstein, 220.
30 A contempt for private, for-profit publication existed at this time in Russia. Business and capital were considered corrupting influences that artists should strictly avoid. For more on salon-goers’ views on private publishing see Todd, 76.
The limitations placed upon women did not preclude them completely from writing. In fact, they made significant contributions, within a narrow range of styles, to the growing body of Russian literature. The album, one of the formats deemed appropriate for women writers, flourished in the early nineteenth century. Albums were essentially literary notebooks filled with poems, musings, and witty comments from friends, salon guests, or suitors. While the owner of the album ultimately decided whether to share its contents, contributors knew that women frequently opened their albums for public viewing in salons. One literary historian points out the parallels between the space women occupied in salons and their relative freedom to write in albums: “Domestic gatherings and salons provided an unthreatening and socially acceptable forum for limited oral circulation of women’s literary efforts. Albums, occupying the border between public and domestic spheres, were the corresponding written forum.”

Salons and albums similarly functioned as informal, exclusive, and thus safe spaces in which women catalogued and shared their literary efforts. Although the album format limited women writers to genres like letters, lyric poetry and, rarely, short prose, it nonetheless granted them a voice in the public sphere and a minor, but sometimes influential, role in the literary world.

As Zinaida Volkonskaia’s life illustrated, however, high society women did take up their pens on occasion to write longer and more ambitious works than albums and letters. Every writer pursuing publication must choose between following popular contemporary trends and attempting to break new ground by introducing a new and distinct style, character types, or language. Volkonskaia chose the latter when she wrote her psychological novella *Laure*, opting for a more

---

31 Hammarberg, 298.
32 William Mills Todd argues that during the first quarter of the nineteenth century a unique literary genre, the “familiar letter,” arose from the correspondences of the Arzamas Literary Society. Indeed, letters were often read aloud or discussed at gatherings like salons. See Todd, The Familiar Letter as a Literary Genre in the Age of Pushkin, 70.
academic style than her peers and receiving sharp criticism from male writers as much for her departure from sentimentalism as for her decision to write at all. Other female writers adhered to literary conventions and endured less criticism for it. For example, Maria Ivzekova (1789–1830), although not known for her participation in salons, produced one drama and at least three novels. In Alessandra Tosi’s words, Ivzekova’s *Milena, ili redkii primer velikodushii* (Milena, or a Rare example of Magnanimity, 1811) deploys “motherhood as the supreme quality of the sentimental heroine…as a safety net, a strategy consciously adopted by female authors to preempt accusations of un-feminine behavior.”

Like many sentimentalist works of the time, *Milena* prominently affirms the subordination of femininity to patriarchy. The heroine Milena obeys her father’s command to marry the older, heavy-drinking Erast. She only pursues her true love, Viktor, after Erast dies and Viktor heroically saves her beloved son. Milena earns her happy ending because she is patient and passive in her waiting for Viktor, her fair and loving protector. Critics decided that Ivzekova, however, was not as passive and admirable as her heroine. She had stepped into the male-dominated world of literature without a patron-protector and parroted sentimentalist tropes, consequently earning scathing reviews. The hostile reception to Ivzekova’s novel indicated that it was still less risky for a woman to co-author a work or not publish at all.

4. Conclusion

Salons ushered women to the forefront of Russian cultural life, bolstering their social influence while simultaneously limiting the opportunities to employ their knowledge of languages and literature through writing. Women flourished within such paradoxical contours. Ekaterina Karamzina began her career as salon hostess alongside her husband and engaged in discourse with some of the most prominent Russian writers of the time. While her husband’s legacy

---

33 Tosi, 225.
overshadowed her and inhibited her ability to carve out a unique identity in Russian culture, she nonetheless was held in high esteem by her guests and remained connected to intellectual and literary circles long after her husband’s death. Zinaida Volkonskaia, in contrast, exercised her independence in the salon to cultivate her writing skills and publishing opportunities as well as to voice support for revolutionaries and their wives. More generally, salons served as hubs of social and intellectual interaction between writers and readers, granting women intimate access to the process of literary development. The small, semi-private spaces in which women could write, such as albums, offered socially acceptable ways of contributing literature but were too restricting for more ambitious and talented women like Volkonskaia and Maria Ivzekova.

Works Cited


_______. *Pis'ma russkago puteshestvennika*. Moscow: M.V. Kliukin, 1900.


