

For my project, I wanted to build upon the ways we have examined women who positioned themselves critically within the literary sphere. More specifically, how women have responded to criticism and argued for the significance of their contribution to Russian literary culture.

The instances that we have looked at in class so far, have primarily dwelled upon how women would respond to male critics attacking, criticizing or dismissing their work, or reacting to their ostracization from Russian literary culture.

I'm less interested in how these authors responded to specific male critics, and more concerned with internal dialogue from women addressing other women, how did they envision the contributions that they and their compatriots made?

I found an article by Charlotte Rosenthal entitled "Women's "Nature" and Creativity in the Silver Age," which investigates women's perception of gender as a factor for their creativity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

More importantly for me, Rosenthal frames her investigation around two leading female critics of their time, who held opposing viewpoints on the importance, role and place of women's writing in Russian literature.

(For my contribution to the salon, I wanted to dive into the stances of the two critics examined by Rosenthal and how they envisioned women's contribution to Russian literary culture.)

The first critic is Elena Koltonovskaia, who wrote on the concept of women's creativity early in her career, but her treatise on the subject is to be found in her forward to a collection of articles penned exclusively by women, which was entitled *Women 's Silhouettes*.

For her, Women's contribution to literature was valuable because women possessed an inherent feminine nature that produced a creative vision unique to women's writing, namely, women had access to an interior breadth and depth of emotion that was inaccessible to men. If women were to pull from these interior emotions, they could produce creative work that was wholly unique from their male counterparts. According to Rosenthal, Koltonovskaia was the only female critic of this period to insist upon the unique possibility and potential of women's creative writing.

However, Koltonovskaia was quite dogmatic about her stance. Within the pages of *Women 's Silhouettes*, she judged each of the works on the merits of their "femininity," rewriting and re-evaluating those that did not meet her standard. Her analysis is conducted through a gendered lens, with some authors (such as Tsekovskaia and Dmitrieva) being criticized for their "coldness" or "lack of depth," and ultimately, they are guilty of suppressing their true feminine selves. In the words of Rosenthal "Though a pioneer in trying to develop a definition of "feminine writing," Koltonovskaia in the end judged women's efforts rather too harshly."

Why is it that Koltonovskaia is so committed to Women's literary work as a separate sphere of contribution to that of men?

She, like others of her time, believed that men were more naturally drawn to the arts and culture, and were therefore, predisposed to produce work that was not only inherently different from women's but in fact superior.

In contrast to Koltonovskaia her contemporary Zinaida Vengerova, a literary historian and critic, downplayed the supposed biological differences between men and women and opted instead to emphasize women's status as individuals on par with men. Unlike Koltonovskaia, Vengerova instead spread her treatise on women's writing across multiple journals for multiple audiences, which somewhat complicates her work, as her emphasis varies depending on audience. For example, she often inverted typically masculine values and wrote women as more active, less materialistic and exhibiting more leadership than men. She insisted that this was true of all Russian women, not just authors, in order to combat the assumptions of her western European audiences that Russia was not, in fact, a backwards society.

While Vengerova emphasized women's needs to be autonomous human beings, not being defined in relation to men, she often co-opted typically male traits in order to raise the status of women. She argued that traits such as independence, intellect, culture, and will (associated with men), were better exemplified within women, who's "feminine" traits, such moral superiority, spirituality, introversion, and passion were better suited to these "supposedly" male features.

In her critical work, Vengerova had a wide range, often criticizing men and women along universal lines. However, in some of her work reviewing women, she praised strength of character, manifesting through "passionate anger" and "feminine spirituality" (typically feminine traits as we saw with Koltonovskaia), but her critic also emphasizes the individuality and independence of the writer (Chiumnia).

What I wish to draw out of Rosenthal's article is not only the diversity of opinion and stances held by women authors and critics, but also recognize the variety of ways that women went about subverting the world of previously male dominated world of literature.