

The Menagerie or the Visitor's Pass? Aleksandra Zrazhevskaiia and Praskov'ia Bakunina on Russian Women Writers

By Diana Greene

Abstract

This article examines an 1842 literary exchange between Aleksandra Zrazhevskaiia (1805-1867) and Praskov'ia Bakunina (1810-1880?) concerning the place of women writers in nineteenth-century Russian literature. It is followed by a translation of the exchange itself. Zrazhevskaiia's "Zverinets" (The Menagerie), a formally innovative work of literary criticism addressed in part to Bakunina, challenged the social norms that discouraged women's writing, as well as the men literary critics who enforced them. In a verse epistle response, Bakunina repudiated Zrazhevskaiia's ideas, maintaining that Russian men critics will extend hospitality and courtesy to women writers who comport themselves as guests in the men's club of Russian letters. The exchange raises questions about the critical reception of women writers in mid nineteenth-century Russia, women as literary critics, and the gendering of nineteenth-century literary movements and aesthetics, which are discussed in relation to the wider pan-European literary climate of the time.