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"Women Artists /Women and Art in Chekhov "

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Is accurate historical information available from literary art? Can *Crime and Punishment* tell us about nineteenth-century pawnbrokers? Although this aspect of literature tends to be underestimated, much great nineteenth-century realist art concerns otherwise absent voices. *Oliver Twist* and *Les Misérables* became musicals, but were meant to be just the opposite: depictions of the absent, the unseen, the mute, the silent. We draw much of our knowledge of "absent" areas from these novels.

The period's realist literature sought to represent those who had no social voice, yet paradoxically, such persons in real life were largely deprived of the means of encountering their counterparts in art and literature. A major census in Russia in 1891 revealed illiteracy among 78% of Russians. Some Russian authors, most notably, Tolstoy, turned to composing simple texts for educating peasants. Chekhov's collected works could conceivably be called "Absent voices"; he also used theater to fill in the lacunae in the accessible social and cultural experience, and forced people to see things they tended not to notice: in his theater, they occur physically before our eyes.

Chekhov began writing in the 1880s and died of tuberculosis at 44, after slightly more than twenty years of creative work. Yet his influence remains: in many respects today we are still living through the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the peak of modernism, whose paradoxes struck at the intersections of things still relevant. In regard to women's activity, theater is paradoxical. Conservative Western societies prohibited women onstage; Russian Orthodox church was also suspicious of female performers. But by the early nineteenth century, theater was the only artistic practice to recognize women as legitimate members.

Women were not allowed in universities under Russia's imperial government; this only changed with the Russian Revolution. More ambitious Russian women before the revolution studied, e.g., in Zurich. But the government did sponsor drama schools for girls. Some revered actors and government-sponsored theater existed in Europe. Sarah Bernhardt (1844 – 1923) toured in 1881, and Chekhov published some skeptical reviews of her; he joked that he had not known how many people lived in Russia until he saw her audiences. Chekhov's wife Olga Knipper (1868-1959) was a revered actress: in the contemporary context, marrying an actress says something about Chekhov's views. (We cannot imagine Tolstoy marrying an actress – he was conservative, almost puritanical.) But Chekhov liked independent, spirited, self-reliant women. Knipper performed in Chekhov's plays in leading roles. At the same time, to more conservative Russians, theater remained a suspect, immoral activity. Women going on stage were thought

unacceptable because they exposed themselves to public viewing. A woman on stage was exposed, desired, and possessed, in a sense, by everyone in the audience.

In 1886, Chekhov, at the age of twenty six, wrote "The Requiem," about a memorial service that a father orders in a church for his recently deceased daughter. Customarily one writes a little note to the priest: "Pray for the soul of the recently deceased, servant of God." But this man, deeply religious, writes to the priest "pray for the soul of the harlot Maria," for she was an actress. For him, the concepts of actress and of harlot were synonymous. The priest scolds the man saying that the father should not use this word, and notes the daughter's fame. The father is moved but again prays "for the soul of the harlot Maria." At the end of the story, "bluish smoke streams from the censer … the streams of smoke, looking like a child's curls, twist, rush upwards to the window and seem to shun the dejection and grief that fill this poor soul." This ambivalent ending relates to our larger theme: Perhaps the "poor" girl indeed had had a life of "dejection" and sin imagined by her father?

Chekhov makes explicit statements about art in *The Seagull* which features two female and two male artists, two of whom are initially only dreaming about a career in art. A similar motif: a young girl tells her friend that her parents do not allow her to visit the famous artist's household because they are bohemian and will spoil her. In an always complicated and ambivalent way, Chekhov makes us ponder this problem. The girl does run away from home, enters a sexual relationship with a famous writer, who uses and then drops her. She finds herself alone with a child in Moscow, a terrible experience. But in a tragically triumphant conclusion we see a woman's ability to become an artist and be taken seriously. The heroine will do this and be independent and admired; but she will also always be filled with "dejection and grief." The few like Sara Bernhardt and Olga Knipper will prevail, but most will perish, be unhappy, fail to realize themselves.

Why does the theater attract so much attention socially when the so-called Women's Question becomes a burning issue of the day? Ultimately, the theater is about women's creative ability. Can a woman create? Women are thought to be essentially derivative, as we see in the tale of Adam's rib. Tolstoy thinks that they cannot create art, that art is not the great purpose for which women exist. Can women become artists in that demiurgic creative sense?

But the theater is mimetic, a kind of art that imitates: and women can imitate men. At the core of this network of paradoxes and tensions comes Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya,* staged in 1899/1900. The play, named after its male protagonist, has an elusive female character (originally played by Olga). This is the beautiful Yelena, a name alluding to Helen of Troy. She marries a much older, retired professor and art critic, originally out of fascination with his personality, but in a few years she sees that he has no substance. This ubiquitous nineteenth-century motif appears also in *Middlemarch* and *Madame Bovary*. These sophisticated women marry men whom they expect to succeed, but in all these texts, the men fail, and fail them, bitterly. In *Uncle Vanya,* three men tell Yelena what to do: her husband, Uncle Vanya, and Dr. Astroff. They treat seduction in almost ideological, not only physical and sexual terms: Vanya and Astroff desire that she prove to them that she can love, that she can be a mermaid, plunge into the water, forget herself. Of course each believes that the other should not be her lover. Yelena, languid, idle, does not know what to do

with herself. Two fleeting remarks change our understanding of her, neither being a long monologue or speech. She mentions *en passant* that she was trained in Petersburg Conservatory, the highest music school; she was talented but instead chose to serve the professor. It is a moment of great anguish and self-analysis, for she realizes that she has been always an episodic character everywhere – in music, in her husband's family, in love affairs. We know nothing else about her music, artistry, ambitions. This allows us to glimpse her in a very different light. [The film, *Vanya on 42nd Street,* is excellent but the music reference is dropped in this scene, mistakenly seen as irrelevant.]

Uncle Vanya denies our expectation of the release of tension. Instead, a silence is created. A similar movement, but more satirical, appears in *The Three Sisters* in the portrayal of Masha (played by Olga Knipper). Masha's husband, a school teacher at a state school and thus a government employee, is paranoid about government regulations. Chekhov calls this sort of proverbial character "a man in a case." He does not want Masha to play piano in a benefit concert. To him, the very idea that his wife would be exposed to a public viewing may be against what is considered proper.

In a real life connection, Chekhov's own wife presents an interesting case study. When Chekhov was dying of consumption, Olga was starring in a theater. All Russia despised Olga for retaining her career rather than nursing her writer husband. (Tolstoy's wife, on the contrary, enjoyed respect.]

A scene from *Seagull* features the two young artists. The man is a writer, but not famous. The woman is an actress, also not famous. Chekhov ingeniously reverses familiar stereotypes, and genre and gender expectations. The heroine's story is the story of a lost soul, and now should be the time for her to pay for her sins: she should deliver her awful, painful speech, and then kill herself according to the nineteenth-century commonplace. Yet she does not. But this is not a story of success and of a gratifying triumph, either. This is, strikingly, a story of something completely different. She has found herself. She realizes she is a small actress, but she has found her faith. A famous Christian notion is that each person must bear his cross; her cross is Art. She has said naïve things in Act 1 about how the crowd will admire her, but now she knows that art is awful – and she must nevertheless serve it. She says this, leaves, and the hero, the man, Konstantin, kills himself because he feels weak and lacks the self-belief that she has. In his usual cruel way, Chekhov kills Kostya offstage. We don't get to see it. The moment also reverses our expectations.

Tolstoy wrote his great novels about high society, but Chekhov wrote about a vast range of social strata. In the second half of the past century, we started to read Chekhov through Beckett where the focus was metaphysical: showing how we thought we were going somewhere but we really were not. Chekhov found little of interest in success, and little in it to write about: he wants people to succeed, but he thinks that success does not require his description, that one should not boast of, write about, or represent success. Those who have succeeded speak for themselves. Successful people in Chekhov are usually pompous and cruel. A writer must write about those who fail and remain speechless.